

Impulse Squared

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Category: StarTrek: Enterprise

Genre: Adventure, Romance

Language: English

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2016-04-15 13:58:56

Updated: 2016-04-26 09:51:51

Packaged: 2016-04-27 16:35:04

Rating: T

Chapters: 13

Words: 33,851

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: Draws heavily on a canon episode, but changes are drastic enough that this is an AU story.

1. Chapter 1

â€œ**Chapter 01â€œ**

Captain Archer took a sip of his coffee, looked at Trip, and said, "Movie night? Why don't we save that for after we've dealt with the Xindi?"

Jon and Trip were in the Captain's Ready Room, and they were discussing Trip's idea to reintroduce Movie Night aboard the Enterprise, in an effort to boost morale.

"Look, Captain," said Trip, after cutting into his "I have to tell you thâ€œ"

"Bridge to the Captain."

Ensign Sato's voice interrupted Trip's thought, and Archer flicked a switch on his desk, and said, "Yes, Ensign."

"I've picked up an automated distress call, Captain," said Hoshi. "It's Vulcan."

"Have you tried responding to the call?" said Archer.

"Yes, Captain," said Hoshi. "Three times, before I contacted you."

Archer looked at Trip, and the look exchanged between the two friends made it clear that their thoughts were aligned on this oddity: although they were on an important mission on behalf of both StarFleet and Earth, they simply could not ignore a distress call from a putative ally.

"I'll be right there," said Archer to his Comm officer, and he made for the Bridge, Trip close behind his captain.

Moments later they stood on the Bridge of the Enterprise, and Archer looked at Ensign Sato.

"Fill me in, Ensign," said Archer.

"The transponder frequency identifies the ship as a D'Kyr class combat cruiser, named the Seleya. She's on the list of things to watch for in the Expanse, given us by the Vulcans."

Archer nodded, for he remembered seeing the ship's name on that list, and said, "What else?"

"She's captained by a Vulcan named Voris, and she entered the Expanse nine months ago. When she disappeared, the Vulcans sent a ship named the Vankaara after the Seleya, but the Vankaara had no luck finding the Seleya."

No luck, thought Archer, running a hand through his hair. That was the understatement of the year. He knew very well what happened to the Vankaara. The crew had gone insane, and seemingly killed each other, although the Vankaara was still unaccounted for.

"Location?" said Archer.

"3.2 light years away, sir, bearing 016, mark 12," said Hoshi.

Archer looked at Ensign Mayweather, the ship's Helm officer, and said, "Take us there, Ensign Mayweather."

"Aye, sir," said Travis.

* * *

><p>Archer was in his Ready Room, when he got the call.<p>

"Ensign Mayweather, Captain. We've arrived at our destination."

"Thanks," said Archer, and shortly afterwards stepped onto the Bridge.

The main video monitor was engaged, and the attention of the entire Bridge crew was fixed on the display, which showed a vast field of fast moving asteroids, ranging from the size of a pebble to a size twenty times or more the length of the Enterprise.

"Where is the Seleya?" said Archer, looking at Lt. Reed, his Tactical officer.

"Some 2,000 kilometers straight ahead, Captain," said Reed.

Looking at Ensign Sato, Archer said, "Call Commander Tucker to the Bridge."

"Yes, Captain," said Hoshi.

Minutes later, Trip came to the Bridge, looked at the Bridge monitor for a moment, then looked at Archer, and said, "What's up, Captain?"

"The Seleya is somewhere in that asteroid field, and if they're in trouble, it's likely a mechanical issue, Trip," said Archer. "I want you on board a shuttle, and I want you on the Seleya. Assess the situation, and report back to me. Better yet, fix their communications gear if that is possible. I'd like to speak directly to Captain Voris."

"Aye, sir," said Trip.

"We don't know what to expect, Trip, so take Lt. Reed with you, two MACOs, and Crewman Humboldt with you," said Archer. "Humboldt is in Security but he's also got some medical training. Make certain he takes a First Aid kit with him. And take Ensign Mayweather to pilot the shuttle. That asteroid field will be tricky as hell to navigate and he's the best pilot aboard."

"Yes, Captain," said Trip, and headed for the Shuttle Bay, followed closely by Lt. Reed, and Ensign Mayweather.

2. Chapter 2

â€œ**Chapter 02â€œ**

To simply say that the relatively short journey to the Seleya was nerve-wracking, was to greatly understate the fact. The asteroid field was a nightmare of fast moving rocks of massive size, most of which could destroy ShuttlePod-One with a single strike, but Travis danced, and rotated, and barrel-rolled the shuttle repeatedly in order to steer clear of those deadly obstacles, and soon enough, the passengers of the shuttle set eyes on the Seleya.

The Vulcan D'Kyr class combat cruiser was impressive as hell to every Human on board the shuttle, but most of all to Trip, an engineer by education and professional practice. These magnificent ships dwarfed the Enterprise, being almost three times the size of the 225 meter Enterprise, and where the Enterprise boasted seven decks, the Seleya boasted fifteen.

"Take us around the ship, Travis," said Trip, looking at the pilot. "Let's have a look at her."

"Yes, Commander," said Ensign Mayweather.

As ShuttlePod-One flew round the Seleya, Lt. Reed scanned the ship, and reported on what data he found.

"Main power is off line," said Malcolm. "Minimal life support is operational. Decks 12 and 13 have decompressed. I'm reading multiple bio-signs, but I can't determine the species for certain, though I believe they are Vulcan. The Launch Bay on Deck 8 is depressurized, so we can't use that venue into the ship, but the Starboard Docking Port on Deck 9 is still intact."

"Nothing else?" said Trip.

"No, sir," said Malcolm.

"Ok. Everyone, grab a PADD," said Trip, passing a box with a half dozen Personal Access Display Devices. "Lt. Reed, transfer the Seleya's schematics to each of these PADDs. If we get separated, we'll each need a map to make our way back to the shuttle. These ships are huge."

Malcolm worked briefly on his console, and seconds later, the Seleya's schematics were wirelessly uploaded to each respective PADD unit.

"Take us in, Travis," said Trip.

"Aye, sir," said Travis, and moments later, ShuttlePod-One was docked with the Seleya.

"I don't know what to expect in there," said Trip, looking at the occupants of the shuttle. "The Seleya looks like hell. The Vulcans might be dead and gone, and the life-signs we're reading may belong to pirates or scavengers, stripping the carcass of the Seleya for valuable parts. We go in there with weapons. All of you, take extra energy packs for your weapon. If the ship is still crewed by Vulcans, they'll look at us as barbarians for coming at them armed to the teeth, but we're not taking any chances."

"Right, sir," said Malcolm.

The two MACOs and Humboldt from Security nodded their agreement with the Commander's orders. None of them wanted to board this wreck unarmed, so it was good to know that a realist, rather than a politician, was calling the shots here.

"What about you, Commander?" said Malcolm, who had noted that Trip had not picked up a phaser rifle.

"I'll take a phaser pistol," said Trip, and an instant later a twenty-eight inch telescoping steel baton seemingly grew from his hand with startling speed, extending almost silently due to it's well oiled spring, and locking to rigidity with a smooth metallic click, "and this baton, for what it's worth."

"Hope you don't need to use it, sir," said Malcolm, impressed by the Commander's sleight of hand, for he had not noticed a weapon on his person, or in his hands, and it was Malcolm's business to notice such things, as the Enterprise's Tactical & Security officer.

Trip pushed a steel button built into the hilt of the steel baton, then pressed the baton against the shuttle's hull, compressing the weapon back into the handle, and nodded his agreement with Malcolm's sentiments, then looked over at the pilot.

"Travis," said Trip, "as soon as we exit the shuttle, I want you to decouple from the Docking Port, fly up top, and settle on the hull. We'll call you when we need you. Don't fall asleep up there, and let someone in an Environmental Suits sneak up on you. You're our only ride off this wreck."

"No, Commander," said Travis. "I'll stay sharp."

"Good," said Trip. "We're turning our comm units off in the interest of stealth, until we make contact with the Vulcans, so you'll handle any inquiries from the Enterprise."

"Right, sir," said Travis.

Trip nodded, looked at his boarding party, and said, "If this ship is in as bad a shape as it seems from out here, this is essentially a caving expedition, so grab flares, a rope, flashlights, whatever you think might come in handy, and is worth taking."

The crewmen going in with Trip took his advice, and soon after, Malcolm said, "We're ready, Commander."

"So let's go," said Trip, and moments later, they exited the shuttle in their marching formation.

Mark Kelly, a MACO, was in the lead, followed by Malcolm, then Trip, while the tail end was brought up by Humboldt, from Security, and then Meyers, the second MACO. This marching order served to protect the ranking officer in uncertain or dangerous terrain, and this ship was definitely the former, and might just be the latter, if someone other than the Vulcans were in control of this ship.

Trip's initial unease with the situation was borne out almost immediately, as the boarding party began moving through the Seleya. The dim emergency lighting the Seleya revealed that the ship was a disaster zone, with battered and twisted metal walls, ceilings and doors, no doubt the result of repeated asteroid impacts, while the various conduit pipes spilled their contents all over the ship, whether these contents were ship's mechanical fluids, or water, or electrical wires now rendered harmless by the fact that electricity no longer ran through them, for the emergency lighting sources had their own power cells. The boarding party remained silent for a good five minutes at Trip's prompt, but all they heard was the dripping of water, a distant hissing sound, and the clanking of metal from somewhere deep within the Seleya. That was all, yet taken as a whole it was much more than enough to put everyone on edge.

Trip said, in a voice not much above a whisper, "Let's make our way to the Bridge on Deck 1, gentlemen. That's eight decks up, but it's our best chance for finding out what the hell happened to this ship."

The members of the boarding party nodded back at Trip and took up their marching order once again, as they moved slowly and cautiously through the ship, counting on stealth more than weaponry for protection.

They moved a short distance through Deck 9 without encountering anyone and climbed the emergency staircase to Deck 8, which seemed much as Deck 9, save fewer lights worked here, and the darkness seemed more menacing, though nothing jumped out at them from that encroaching blackness, and eventually they moved up to Deck 7. Some noises on this deck, but nothing identifiable, and Trip pointed to Kelly, the leading MACO, and Malcolm, and then pointed them towards the source of the sound. The chosen men nodded, and moved slowly in that direction. Ten minutes later, they returned just as cautiously, and Malcolm knelt next to Trip.

"We didn't find anything, Commander," said Malcolm in soft voice.

Trip nodded, and said, "Deck 6."

It took thirty minutes to access Deck 6, for the emergency stairs were blocked off: the access hatch to Deck 6 had been welded shut. No one in the boarding party could think of a good reason for that, though a spray of arterial blood on the walls of Deck 6, when they eventually found an alternate way up using a maintenance tube, gave them all ideas, none of them good.

"What the hell happened here, Commander," said Malcolm, looking to Trip for answers, though knowing full well that Trip was as much in the dark as the rest of them.

"No idea, Malcolm," said Trip. "It was green Vulcan blood though, and it wasn't cleaned up, which raises lots of questions, and gives no answers."

"No one could survive losing that much blood," said Malcolm. "So, where's the body?"

Trip shrugged his shoulders, and the two men made eye contact, and Malcolm was relieved to see that if Trip's eyes held no answers, they were at least, cool, calculating and unafraid, which was a blessing under the circumstances. A frightened squad leader was worse than a hindrance.

"So we head for Deck 5?" said Malcolm now in hushed tones.

"The schematics show that the Medical Bay is located on Deck 6," said Trip. "Let's swing by there before we move on."

Malcolm nodded, and the squad began moving towards the port side of the Seleya, eventually coming to the Medical Bay. This place was the only suite still brightly lit, and Malcolm and Kelly entered the Bay cautiously, searching it thoroughly, before waving Trip in. The commander entered the Medical Bay and took the room in with a glance, while Humboldt and Meyer stood outside the doors, keeping watch on their surroundings.

"How come this place still has power, sir?" said Kelly. "Rest of the ship is barely lit, but the Medical Bay is as bright as a lighthouse. I thought it was a trap at first because of that fact."

"Apparently, Medical Bay has a backup power source on Vulcan ships, in case the main grid goes down," said Trip, "and lights don't use up much energy."

"Trip," said Malcolm, from some twenty feet away, staring at something hidden behind a cloth partition. "You have to see this."

Trip crossed the room to Malcolm, followed by Kelly, and then pushed aside the curtain, to see that the curtain had concealed an autopsy table, and on that table rested a Vulcan corpse. How long it had laid there was uncertain, for a stasis field was operable over the table, which meant no bacterial action and no decomposition, yet it was

still a hideous sight. The female's eyes were open, her face was covered in large scabs which seemed crusted by pus, her torso was cut open, her internal organs were gone. In addition, her left leg had been surgically removed, four inches above her knee.

"Look at this," said Malcolm, pointing out a series of long scratches into the surface of the steel surgical table, where the Vulcan's left leg would have been.

"Odd," said Trip, "but no odder than the rest of this ship."

"I beg to differ, Commander Tucker," said Kelly. "I see what Lt. Reed is getting at here."

Trip looked at the MACO, and said, "What's that, Kelly?"

"That leg wasn't removed cleanly, sir," said Kelly. "The scratches are all an inch apart. Someone's been cutting steaks from that woman's leg with a surgical saw. This ship's been stranded here for months. Maybe they crew's been forced to cannibalism."

Trip looked again at the scratches on the table's surface, and said, "That doesn't make sense. A ship this size has enough food and water storage for years. So why would anyone resort to eating corpses?"

"Engines are malfunctioning, Commander," said Malcolm, "which probably means that the cargo holds are filled with fresh foods that spoiled quickly."

"Sure," said Trip, "but you're forgetting that Vulcans are logical creatures, and they would have anticipated that possibility. You'll find two or three years worth of grains, legumes, dried fruit, dehydrated vegetables, canned soups, protein powders, and such, if you search this ship."

"Maybe you're right," said Malcolm. "You still can't explain the scratches on the surface of that table though."

"I can't," said Trip, "and neither can you. Hell, who knows how many autopsies have been performed on that table. Let's not jump to conclusions. For now we'll collect every bit of data we come across, and make conclusions when we're back aboard the Enterprise."

"Right," said Malcolm.

"What now?" said Kelly.

"Can we download the medical reports filed by the doctor, from these computers?" said Trip. "I know we can't read it now, but Hoshi can translate the data once we get it back aboard the Enterprise."

"I don't see how, unless we contact the Enterprise, and get Ensign Sato's help with translation," said Malcolm. "If I can't read the menu options, I can't transfer the data."

"Right," said Trip, "but I don't want to spend a lot of time in this place. It's too well lit. I feel safer in the shadows."

Trip grabbed a small toolkit which he carried attached to his belt, opened and examined the Medical Bay's computer and then removed its solid state hard-drive, and after a moment's thought, popped out the computer's motherboard, with its embedded CPU. Kelly watched Trip with curiosity, then looked at Lt. Reed, a question in his eyes.

"The Vulcan computers will be networked," said Malcolm, "with all the data accessible from the Bridge, but apparently the Vulcans backup important data locally as well. If the main data storage dump is damaged or destroyed, these local backups would tell them something. Commander Tucker made a guess, and it was a good one."

"And the CPU and motherboard are to help us activate and decipher the hard-drive?" said Kelly.

"No," said Trip, looking at Kelly as he wrapped the motherboard in what looked like a discarded shirt he'd picked off the floor, "that's just plain curiosity on my part. Vulcan tech is quite interesting, and I always like learning new things. Now, turn around, Kelly."

The MACO did as ordered, and Trip placed the hard-drive and motherboard inside the backpack in which the MACO carried extra energy packs for their weapons.

"Let's get back on track for the Bridge," said Trip, after taking a last look at the Vulcan corpse.

The MACO took the lead once more, followed by Malcolm, and Malcolm by Trip, and then Trip by Humboldt and Meyers, as they fell in order once again, and headed for Deck 5.

3. Chapter 3

â€œ**Chapter 03â€œ**

"Jesus," said Malcolm, looking around Deck 5, which seemed no better than the other decks they'd moved through. In fact it looked much worse than the rest, for a half dozen Vulcan corpses littered the deck, all hideously mutilated, and two of them badly decomposed. "What the hell happened on this ship?"

As if in answer to Lt. Reed's question, a noise came from one of the decks below them. It was a metallic clang, repeated over and over, as if someone was banging an iron pipe against one of the structural steel beams.

"What is that sound?" said Humboldt.

"Nothing good," said Meyers.

"You don't know that," said Humboldt. "It might be someone trying to attract our attention, in order to secure our aid."

"Trust me," said Meyers, and looked at Trip.

"We can't be drawn here and there by every sound, Humboldt," said Trip. "We keep heading for the Bridge. That's our best option for figuring out what's happening aboard this ship."

"Yes, sir," said Humbold.

They moved past the corpses and moved through Deck 5, which seemed to be a largely social deck: personnel quarters, kitchen, two mess halls, a gym, several multi-purpose rooms for entertaining, etcâ€| but these once welcoming spaces seemed forbidding now, seemed threatening. They'd made it halfway through this deck when the banging began again, this time coming from one of the decks above them. Seconds later, answering noise came from below, and the members of the squad looked silently at each other at that, and then kept moving.

Soon after, Kelly, who was the point man of the boarding party stopped, and raised his right hand, which brought the squad to a halt. A sound came from the left, but the darkness hid the source, and then two more sounds came from somewhere behind them, and something that sounded like a growl came from straight ahead, though nothing, and no one, was visible, but it was clear to every man, that they'd been surrounded by something or someone, and the boarding party dealt with it per StarFleet training, odd men facing starboard, even facing port, all peering outwards towards whatever was out there. Since stealth was no longer a factor, every rifleman flicked on the the small flashlight built as part of the phaser rifle's stock, and panned them outward, the dim blue light playing over the cold manic eyes, hard faces, and wicked looking melee weapons held in the hands of the Vulcan crew of the Seleya, though they looked more like madmen, or perhaps dead men, than professional officers of the Vulcan Navy. The only thing which had restrained these Vulcans from attacking, was the slight self-interest still left in them, which feared rifles possibly set to kill.

"We move to the stair well, fifty feet to port," said Trip.
"Now."

They did so as a unit, Kelly and Malcolm clearing the way by stunning the Vulcans blocking the port side, while Humbold and Meyers picked off the bolder Vulcans on the starboard side, with Trip aiding whichever side need help more, with his pistol fire, and they made Deck 4, shutting the access hatch behind them. There were alternate ways for the Vulcans to follow them onto Deck 4, but every other option would take a while, given that the turbo-lifts were not functioning.

* * *

><p>"Go!" said Trip to Malcolm, having just disabled the mechanical security lock on the same door which Malcolm was now prying apart using some structural steel he'd picked up off the floor, and was now using as an improvised crowbar.<p>

A few moments later Malcolm had pried the door open far enough, and Malcolm shouted, "Move! Move!"

Kelly rushed through, and almost immediately the electric shriek of his phaser rifle, sounded once, then again, and then once more.

"Malcolm, go," said Trip, and Lt. Reed obeyed those orders, only their dire situation preventing the Lieutenant from arguing that it

should be Trip who goes first.

Immediately, Malcolm's phaser fire was added to Kelly's, and Kelly shouted, "Clear!"

Trip yelled, "Let's go Meyers! Now!" and slipped through the open door.

Meyers backed through the doorway, phaser rifle at the ready.

"Give me a hand," said Trip to Meyers.

Trip and Meyers pushed the door closed, then Trip quickly engaged the manual lock, and looked at the men around him. Humboldt was no longer a member of the boarding party, for his skull had been split open by a Vulcan using a fire-axe as a weapon, a Vulcan as covered in sores as the rest of them, and as aggressive as a rabid pit bull. Meyers had switched his weapon to kill on his own initiative and had blown that Vulcan's head apart as payback, but there was nothing to be done for Humboldt, so they left him where he fell, and moved on, taking Humboldt's rifle with them.

"They came out of nowhere," said Malcolm.

"What now, Commander?" said Meyers, Malcolm and Kelly listening. "I say we find a way back to the shuttle, and bug out of here."

"We're closer to the Bridge, than we are to the Starboard Docking Port on Deck 9," said Trip. "We make it to the Bridge. It will be secure by design."

"If it's impossible for them to get onto the Bridge after us," said Kelly, "it will also be impossible for us to leave the Bridge. They'll just starve us out."

"Have faith, Kelly. There's always a way out," said Trip. "This isn't a squad leader speaking here, it's an engineer."

"Yes, sir," said Kelly.

"We should move," said Malcolm. "We've got the rest of Deck 4 to navigate safely, then two more decks before we take the Bridge."

"Right," said Trip.

* * *

><p>Deck 4 had been relatively empty after the initial rush, as was Deck 3, but Deck 2 was a nightmare. The Vulcans must have been holding a convention there, for the boarding party was swarmed at every twist and turn, and it was only the professionalism of Kelly, Reed and Meyers which allowed them to make their way to the access hatch, and it was they who bought Trip the time required to bypass the security lock on the hatch, and finally give them access to Deck 1, and the Bridge. They quickly entered the Bridge and closed the door, which activated the security protocol, and sealed the door. Only seconds after they'd closed the door, heavy thumps sounded through the doors as the Vulcans began beating on the doors with steel tools.<p>

"I'm going to have nightmares about this mission," said Kelly.

Malcolm nodded his agreement, a bewildered look on his face, but Meyers laughed, and said, "Come on, Lt. Reed. This whole thing just gets the blood moving."

"Meyers, you cock," said Malcolm, "I'm going to get up and beat the stuffing out of you, if you don't shut your mouth."

"Yes, sir," said Meyers, but the MACO couldn't stop laughing at Malcolm.

Meanwhile, Trip glanced round the Seleya's Bridge, impressed by his first look at the Bridge of a Vulcan battlecruiser. He took note of the fact that something of a Situation Room was located to the back of the Bridge, on a raised dais, and two doors led off the Bridge, one of which was likely the Captain's Ready Room.

"Both of you," said Trip. "Shut up, and let's get to work."

"Yes, sir," said Malcolm, and Meyers nodded.

"The lights are working, so the Bridge has a secondary source of power. We should try to learn what we can from their computers. Malcolm, get in touch with the Enterprise," said Trip, "send Hoshi some photos of your menu options, and have her talk you through the system. See if you can access their records, or the captain's logs."

"Yes, sir," said Malcolm.

"Kelly, you and Meyers stand guard at the door," said Trip. "They'll never get in by battering that door down, but if one of them knows how to bypass the security lock we're in trouble, so give me a shout."

"Yes, sir," said Kelly, and Meyers confirmed his orders with a nod of his head.

While the three men went about their appointed tasks, Trip searched the Bridge, and found what he was looking for, behind a metal grate which he removed in no time. As expected, he found a maintenance tube which carried data cables, power lines, and scrubbed air to the Bridge, and it was big enough to allow a Vulcan to move through the tube on a wall mounted ladder, in order to allow the maintenance crew to service the ship. Satisfied, Trip moved through the first door off the Bridge, to find a conference room for the Bridge crew. Quite logical, he thought, and moved through the other door to find the Captain's Ready Room, as expected. It was larger than Captain Archer's, and it had been an elegant room once, but now the desk was flipped over and broken, the walls smeared with green blood, the bookshelves overturned and the wall mounted video monitor smashed. Trip was about to return to the Bridge, when he heard a slight sound, coming from a side room that was probably a lavatory.

Phase pistol in the left hand, extensible baton hilt in the right, Trip moved silently in the direction of the noise, and peered cautiously inside, then drew suddenly back when a Vulcan jumped at

him with admirable speed, knife in hand, viciously hacking at Trip's face, but Trip was ready, and as the Vulcan thrust the knife he'd pressed the button which extended his steel baton, and struck the Vulcan's knife from her hand, for he saw now as she backed up, holding her hand to her chest, that he was dealing with a Vulcan female. This one had no sores on her face and hands, and though there was pain and perhaps fear in her eyes, she did not radiate that cold rage and hatred he'd seen in the faces of the other Vulcans.

Kelly, Malcolm and Meyers had rushed the Ready Room upon hearing the ruckus, and quickly raised rifles and took aim on the Vulcan who had retreated into a corner, but Trip said, "No!"

The three men looked at him now, and Trip said, "Get back to your posts."

"Sir," said Kelly, "I don't think thâ€"

"Now."

Kelly looked at the others, shrugged, and left, taking the others with him, as Trip turned to face the Vulcan. She remained standing in a corner, cradling her hand, and staring at Trip with confusion, so Trip drew the comm unit from his pocket, and activated the Vulcan/English translator app.

"I am Commander Tucker, of the StarFleet vessel Enterprise," said Trip. "We are here to help."

His words were translated into Vulcan, but the Vulcan did not reply, and Trip wondered briefly if the translator app was working properly, but then the Vulcan said, "I speak English."

Her words were translated from English to Vulcan, so Trip shut off the translator app, and pocketed his comm unit.

She'd spoken tentatively, and she still looked confused and perhaps fearful, but it was a start. Trip compressed his baton and slipped it back in his pants pocket, the Vulcan watching him like a hawk.

"Who are you?" said Trip.

"My name is T'Pol," said the Vulcan. "I am the Deputy Science Officer of the Seleya, Commander Tucker."

"People call me Trip, T'Pol," said Trip. "It's a nickname."

"Vulcans do not employ first names, or nicknames, with people they have just met, Commander Tucker."

"Fair enough," said Trip. "We need to talk, T'Pol. Let's sit down in the Ready Room."

"Very well," said the Vulcan, then turned her head suddenly, as if she'd seen something out of the corner of her eye, and gasped.

"What's wrong, T'Pol?" said Trip.

The Vulcan looked back and Trip, and it took almost a minute before

T'Pol said, "I am losing control, Commander Tucker, and I believe that I will probably descend into madness like the rest of the crew, in a matter of days, or weeks at most, if I do not get off this ship."

"We'll have you off the ship long before that," said Trip.

He led the way into the Ready Room, and T'Pol followed the Human. She watched him flip a couple of chairs over.

"Come on, T'Pol," said Trip, indicating the chairs. "Please."

She sat, although the chairs were too close together for her liking. What if the Human jumped at her? He might overpower her in her present condition and kill her before she couldâ€". Breathing deeply, T'Pol fought down the rising panic and sat.

"You're the only rational Vulcan we've met so far, T'Pol," said Trip. "Are there others like you aboard the ship?"

"I am the last, Commander Tucker," said T'Pol, involuntarily noting that the Human's eyes were a fetching shade of ice blue which no Vulcan had ever displayed, "and I do not believe that I am rational at the present time."

"You're a science officer, T'Pol," said Trip. "Is there anything we can do for the rest of the crew, perhaps aid their recovery?"

"I do not believe so, Commander Tucker. Perhaps your ship's Medical Officer can aid them. I can not. My medical knowledge is inadequate."

Trip nodded, accepting the Vulcan's logic, and noticed that she was still cradling the hand which he'd struck with the steel baton.

"I need to look at that hand, T'Pol," said Trip. "I may have struck you hard enough to break your hand. I'm sorry about that."

"You were not at fault, Commander Tucker."

"Your hand, T'Polâ€|"

Slowly, cautiously, T'Pol extended her hand, and the Human took her hand in his. He was gentle as he probed her hand with his fingers, and something about the Human's demeanor or glance, calmed T'Pol down a bit, and she felt something close to regret when he released her hand, for it was her first recent contact with another being which carried no danger for her.

"Yeah," said Trip. "I'm sorry, T'Pol. Your middle, ring and pinky fingers are broken. I'll fashion a splint for you, until our doctor can look at the hand. Wait here."

"Yes," said T'Pol.

Moments later, Commander Tucker returned with a First Aid kit, and with reasonable skill he fashioned a splint which bound T'Pol's three broken fingers together, and then pulled out a loaded syringe.

"What's that?" said T'Pol, fearful now that Commander Tucker had changed his mind, and meant to poison her now, meant to get rid of her!

"A localized anesthetic, T'Pol," said Trip, "to dull the pain."

"I do not need an anesthetic," said T'Pol, and noted the Human studying her closely.

"Your call, T'Pol," said Trip, "but you don't need to fear me. I will never hurt you."

Something in the man's look, or his voice, touched T'Pol and she said, "All right."

Trip injected her gently with the anesthetic, and within seconds the pain in her hand indeed subsided.

"Thank you, Commander Tucker."

"You're welcome," said Trip, standing. "Now let's get off this ship. Follow me."

When Trip and T'Pol made the Bridge, Malcolm looked at Trip.

"What is it?" said Trip.

"Computer access is restricted by an alpha-numeric password," said Malcolm. "I've had no luck cracking the code."

"The computer system was reset when main power went down," said T'Pol, suspiciously: perhaps she could trust this Commander Tucker, but the rest— "What do you want with our computer systems?"

"Anything that would tell us what happened here, T'Pol," said Trip. "Captain's logs, medical records, something, anything, to take back to your people."

"There is no need to search the computers, Commander Tucker," said T'Pol. "I can answer all your questions, but we need to get off the Seleya. Perhaps your doctor can do something for my crew."

"All right," said Trip. "Let's go."

"If we're going out the front door, Commander," said Kelly, "I recommend setting phasers on kill, given how resistant they are to our stun settings."

"Those are Vulcan officers and crewmen, Human!" said T'Pol. "Your doctor may be able to heal them! You will not kill them!"

"She's right, Kelly," said Trip. "In any case, we're going out the back door. Come on."

Seconds later, with everyone looking down the maintenance shaft, Meyers said, "Will this take us all the way down to Deck 9?"

"The maintenance shafts cover every section of the ship, Meyers," said Trip, "but we may have to change shafts now and then."

T'Pol nodded, and said, "Commander Tucker is correct."

"What about her?" said Malcolm, noting T'Pol's hand. "She won't manage all that way with a broken hand. We'll have to exit the shaft, and try our luck in the open, for her sake."

"I will manage, Lt. â€|"

"Reed," said Malcolm.

"I will manage, Lt. Reed," said T'Pol, "but we should move now, while I still can. My thoughts... my irrational thoughts and fears are difficult to control."

"Right," said Trip. "Kelly, you've got point again, I'm behind you, then T'Pol, then Malcolm, then Meyers. Let's go."

4. Chapter 4

â€"***Chapter 04â€"***

The passage back to Deck 9 was a nightmare. Moving down the maintenance shafts was easy enough at first, for the way was clear to Deck 3, but then Kelly triggered a mechanical trap that drove a sharpened pipe through his thigh, and though it fortunately missed the MACOs femoral artery, it hampered his movement greatly. As to why the hell the Vulcans booby trapped the maintenance shaft, well, no one had an answer to that.

Trip left them standing there, hugging the stairs, while he went on ahead to scout the way, for he was the most likely to spot another mechanical trap and by the time he returned T'Pol was speaking to herself in Vulcan and sweating profusely, though she perked up a bit when Trip returned, and addressed them all.

"We can continue in this shaft to Deck 4," said Trip, "and no further. Someone welded plate steel across the maintenance shaft, sealing it off."

So they took the shaft to Deck 4, and then moved quietly through the deck, heading for the turbo-lift shaft, for Trip had decided that dealing with physical obstructions was preferable to dealing with the Vulcans, especially with Kelly slowing down the pack. So the turbo-lift shaft it was. They wedged the turbo-lift doors apart, and had just tied off a rope, when a Vulcan showed up, a chef's knife in one hand.

"No noise," said Trip, extending his baton, as he caught Meyers' eye. "Don't kill him."

Meyers drew a knife, while Malcolm held back, rifle at the ready, intending to use it only as a last resort to save Meyers or Trip. T'Pol leaned against the wall, and moaned. The Vulcan approached them, and Trip split from Meyers, placing the Vulcan on the horns of a dilemma, though the Vulcan soon resolved the dilemma by lunging at Trip, and slashing with the knife. The Vulcan missed, and Trip missed as well in his attempt to strike the Vulcan's knife hand, but caught his face with a backhand strike, as he drew his hand back to it's

starting position. Green blood and teeth flew from the Vulcan's mouth, and he screamed briefly, before Meyers struck the Vulcan's head with the pommel of his knife. The Vulcan collapsed.

"Let's move," said Malcolm, his fingers already securing the rope.

"Meyers, take point," said Trip. "I'll follow with T'Pol. Kelly, you come next. Malcolm, you're last."

Meyers slipped down the rope effortlessly from Deck 4, and it was long enough to reach Deck 6, and once there, Meyers stepped onto a small ledge formed by the tube wall's thickness, and released the emergency latch holding the doors together, to slide them easily aside. He took a quiet look around the turbo-lift lobby, then used a small flashlight to silently signal the others. Trip, leaning a bit over the edge noted Meyers' blinking light, and responded in kind, then grabbed hold of the rope, and looked at T'Pol, who watched him warily, like a man on death row.

"I do not think that I can move down a rope, in my present condition, Commander Tucker," said T'Pol. "You must leave me here."

"Come here, T'Pol," said Trip, calmly. "We can make it."

"No."

"T'Pol," said Trip, willing the Vulcan to trust him as he didn't want to have to stun her, and surprisingly she did, moving slowly to Trip. "Hold on to the rope, T'Pol."

She did so, as Trip slipped on the pair of work gloves he invariably carried on his person. He did so in order to prevent rope burn, or slippage, and T'Pol understood his purpose. She nodded, if not with confidence in her eyes, at least with support.

"Come on," said Trip, taking the rope from T'Pol. "Hang on."

T'Pol pressed herself against Commander Tucker, placed her hands around his neck, and the two stepped over the edge together, into the darkness of the turbo-lift shaft.

"Raise your legs, and place your thighs atop mine," said Trip. "Place your legs over mine. Quickly."

T'Pol did so, then Trip placed his feet on the walls of the shaft, and T'Pol saw the sense of it. Now her thighs rested atop his, while her hands were around his neck, thus providing an extra measure of safety for her—unless the commander lost his grip. Trip started duck walking down the shaft now, breathing deeply from the effort of it all, but he made Deck 6 eventually, if not as easily as Meyers. The waiting MACO pulled them both into the lobby, then signaled Kelly, and that MACO had a good deal of upper body strength, and combined with the use of his good leg, Kelly descended two decks much more comfortably than he could have walked those same decks. Once Meyers had pulled Kelly into the lobby, he signaled Malcolm. Up above, Malcolm slid down the rope quickly, wishing there had been a way to repeat this maneuver: if there had been an turbo-lift cable, they could all have made use of it, but the Seleya utilized

magnetic-levitation for their turbo-lifts, and the walls were too smooth for him to cut the rope for reuse, and climb down without the aid of a rope.

Once all stood in the lift lobby on Deck 6, they took stock of the others. Meyers and Malcolm were as good as new. Trip was good, if a bit winded still. Kelly was good, but slow. T'Pol looked fit, other than her broken fingers, but there was a strained look about her, and from the way she occasionally flinched, her eyes widened in fear, it was apparent that T'Pol was hallucinating.

"T'Pol," said Trip, and the Vulcan's head turned to him, and her eyes locked onto his own. "Three more decks, and then we get you off this ship."

T'Pol nodded her understanding, though she started hyper-ventilating.

"Slow down, T'Pol," said Trip. "Slow down your breathing."

The Vulcan heard his words, and closed her eyes. After a few minutes her breathing slowed and she opened her eyes.

"T'Pol, you help Kelly," said Trip. "Let him lean on you."

"Yes," said T'Pol.

"Kelly," said Trip, "Vulcans are stronger than us, so give her some weight to carry. Load her up."

"Yes, Commander," said Kelly, though he looked at T'Pol uncertainly, but the Vulcan confirmed the commander's words.

Next, Trip reached out to Travis, piloting the shuttle craft.

"Tucker to ShuttlePod-One."

"Yes, Commander," said Travis.

"Head back to the Starboard Docking Port on Deck 9," said Trip. "Dock with the Seleya, but don't open your door until we get there. I'll explain later."

"Yes, Commander. On my way."

Trip looked at the boarding party, and said, "We need to move."

Each man had a phaser rifle now, as Trip had Humboldt's rifle, and though Kelly would be firing one handed, he was good enough to give covering fire with one hand, if needed. They began moving again. Meyers took point, Trip followed, then Kelly/T'Pol, and Malcolm bringing up the rear. They'd gone a couple of hundred feet this way, and then they heard the same metallic clanging as they had before. Trip looked at Meyers. The Vulcan they had fought together, and disabled but not killed, had regained consciousness, and was now giving the alarm.

It was a mistake to leave him alive, thought Trip. Time to get the hell off this damned ship.

They moved through Decks 6 and 7 quickly, with T'Pol practically carrying Kelly, and encountering only five Vulcans on Deck 7. Four men armed with phaser rifles made short work of them, stunning them, and moving on. Deck 8 was nastier, and scarier, for this deck was almost clothed in darkness, with only a half dozen emergency lights still functioning on the whole deck. They fought a dozen Vulcans on Deck 8, and Meyers was knocked down and mounted by a Vulcan, though he managed to hold him off long enough for Trip to shoot the Vulcan in the head, stunning the Vulcan immediately. Eventually, they made Deck 9 and entered the shuttle, to breathe a sigh of relief, for they'd heard the stomping of what sounded like a hundred pairs of feet pounding above their heads on Deck 8 earlier, all coming their way.

"Get us out of here, Ensign," said Trip.

"What about Humboldt," said Travis.

"He's gone," said Trip. "Take us to the Enterprise."

5. Chapter 5

â€"Chapter 05â€"

"How is she, Doctor," said Archer.

The boarding party had reported Humboldt's loss, brought back some data on the hard-drive which Trip had taken from the Seleya's Medical Bay, and which Hoshi had translated for Phlox. In addition, they'd also brought back a Vulcan female, which Phlox had sedated almost immediately, which had displeased the Captain, though medical decisions were out of his hands. But eight hours had passed since then, and Captain Archer was here for answers.

"She's in bad shape, Captain," said Phlox. "So bad, that even heavily medicated she was hallucinating and paranoid. I understand she's been that way the entire time since the boarding party found her. I sedated her in hopes of some improvements when she wakes."

"What's her prognosis?"

"Uncertain, for now. Look," said Phlox, indicating the EKG monitor readouts, "her heartbeat is wildly erratic, where we should be seeing a nice, regular pattern. And here, notice her brain wave activity, compared to these lines, which represent the norm for her species. I am optimistic by nature, Captain, but we may lose her, either to madness, or death."

"I need to speak with her," said Archer.

"Impossible, Captain," said Phlox. "She needs her rest!"

"Doctor," said Archer, "the crew of the Seleya numbers some three hundred souls. I need every bit of information to determine if they can be saved, or not. I need to speak to her."

"Very well," said Phlox, "but a few minutes only, Captain! Do you understand?"

"Yes, Doctor," said Archer, knowing how ruthless a tyrant Phlox could be in service to his patients.

"Make certain that you do," said Phlox, and administered a stimulant.

T'Pol woke slowly, and opened her eyes to find herself in what was clearly a medical bay, attended by a Denobulan holding a hypo-spray, and a Human with the insignia of a StarFleet captain on his uniform. She recalled something of what she'd gone through recently, and struggled to piece it all together, when the Denobulan spoke.

"Greetings, T'Pol," said the Denobulan. "I am Phlox, the ship's doctor, and you're in my Sick Bay aboard the Enterprise."

"Doctor," said T'Pol. "What is my condition?"

"Uncertain at the moment, but I hope to bring about improvements in your condition, with time," said Phlox. "I spent a year training on Vulcan, becoming familiar with the biological processes of your species, and more time since then, keeping up with current medical knowledge from the Vulcan Medical Database, so I am certain that factor will be helpful here."

T'Pol nodded, and said, "Thank you, Doctor."

She looked at the Human captain.

"Good morning," said the Human. "I understand your name is T'Pol, but if you'd rather I used your rank, I'll do so."

"T'Pol will do, Captain," said T'Pol.

The man nodded, and said, "So you're familiar with StarFleet's ranks and insignia. I'm Jonathan Archer."

T'Pol looked at the man, and said, "I am grateful that you responded to our distress call."

"I understand that you're the Deputy Science Officer, so tell me, what the hell happened to the Seleya, T'Pol?"

"Nine months ago, we embarked on a mission to chart the thermobaric clouds surrounding the Delphic Expanse," said T'Pol. "After several days, the Seleya was caught in a subspace eddy and we were pulled into the Expanse. Once in the Expanse, we were subject to unusual gravimetric anomalies, which caused serious damage to the Seleya, but we were told that Trellium-D would protect us from those anomalies, if we but found a source of Trellium ore, and lined our hull with the element Trellium-D, refined from the ore."

"Why not simply turn back towards your sector of space immediately?" said Archer.

"Among the damage we suffered from the first gravimetric anomaly was damage to our warp engines, and while our engineers returned warp function to the Seleya in a matter of days, it was not enough," said T'Pol. "We were limited to Warp 1.8"

"I see," said Archer, understanding now: at Warp 1.8, it would have taken the Seleya some eighteen years to return back to Vulcan.

"Captain Voris realized we could not simply wait around for rescue," said T'Pol, "though it was our best hope. We had to cover our hull with Trellium-D, then travel the region of the Expanse in which we'd found ourselves, on a search for facilities capable of producing the warp engine parts we required to fully repair our warp engines, so we left a buoy explaining our situation to any potential Vulcan rescuers and began looking for Trellium ore."

"Logical," said Archer, encouraging the Vulcan to continue her story.

"We considered ourselves fortunate to stumble across this asteroid field, as these asteroids were loaded with Trellium ore," said T'Pol, "so Captain Voris ordered that our shields be brought to maximum strength, and we waded out into that field in search of the richest deposits of Trellium. The asteroids were no danger to us, given our shields, but we soon noticed various undesirable effects occurring among the crew. Uncontrolled outbursts of emotion, and even violence, began occurring regularly, and my superior, Science Officer Vo'Lek, urged Captain Voris to take us out of the asteroid field, for he had determined that the very Trellium ore we were so desperately after was the cause of our crew's emotional volatility."

"I take it that Captain Voris did not listen to Vo'Lek's advice," said Archer, Phlox a silent witness.

"He did not," said T'Pol. "He feared the effects of the gravimetric anomalies on our ship more than some minor scuffles among the crew, and insisted that we continue moving slowly through the asteroid field, collecting and processing asteroids in order to extract enough Trellium-D from Trellium ore. Given the size of the Seleya, you can infer that we needed to process a great many asteroids, in order to extract enough Trellium-D for our needs. During this entire time, the acts of violence increased, but we were making such progress in collecting ore and refining Trellium-D that we believe we'd have enough to cover the hull of the Seleya in a few more weeks."

"Yes," said Archer. "Go on, T'Pol."

"I am not certain what brought on the act," said T'Pol, "but one of our Marines, or a team of them, scuttled the Seleya's engines, and blew a hole in our hull in the process. Suddenly, we lost the power to leave the asteroid field, and we also lost the power to generate shields, and the ship began to take a beating from the asteroids moving unpredictably around us."

T'Pol began coughing now, and it took a few minutes before she was able to continue her story.

"We had been in the Expanse for two months now," said T'Pol, "and we were surprised and disappointed that the High Command had not sent a rescue ship for us."

"They did, T'Pol," said Archer. "The Vankaara."

"Well, the Vankaara never found us," said T'Pol.

"She suffered the same fate as the Seleya, minus the asteroids," said Archer. "The crew went mad and killed each other off. It's possible that they purchased some Trellium-D in order to coat the ship's hull as well. We've run across one such mining facility that had ore for sale, and there must be many others, given the importance of this element in the Expanse. Or they could have made contact with the element some other way."

"Perhaps," said T'Pol, saddened at the loss of two fine ships, and two fine crews.

"I begin to suspect," said Phlox, after noting with concern, T'Pol's brain wave patterns, "that the Expanse itself, or rather the unusual gravimetric anomalies, are causing a sensitivity in the Vulcan mind, and that this Trellium-D, which is apparently a Vulcan neuro-toxin, may just intensify the effects caused by the anomalies in the Expanse."

"How is it that you've resisted these effects, longer than the other Vulcans, T'Pol?" said Archer. "Trip tells me that you're the only normal Vulcan they saw on the Seleya."

"We had always expected rescue," said T'Pol, "and hoped for it, but after the Seleya's engines were sabotaged by the Marine, our situation grew truly dire, and Captain Voris ordered myself, and three others, to stock a shuttle with food, and seek out help. We did what we could, by dropping automated distress buoys outside the asteroid field at various points, and then searched the region for any signs of intelligent life which could aid the Seleya, but with the limited range of a shuttle, it was not surprising that we had no luck, though we searched desperately."

Phlox noted once more the Vulcan's erratic brain wave patterns which were getting more and more disorganized, and noted that the EKG showed that the electrical patterns of her heartbeat were becoming more irregular.

"Captain," said Phlox, "I think she's had about enough for now."

"Give me just a moment longer, Doctor," said Archer, "she's almost at the end of it."

"T'Pol?" said Phlox.

"I will be all right, Doctor," she said. "In any case, we searched for three months, checking in with the Seleya periodically, and we noted that our contact became more and more sporadic, as if no one was manning the Comm station, and when we did get a response, the response was erratic. We were already deeply concerned, but helpless."

Archer nodded, urging T'Pol to continue, though noting that she was clawing her thigh unconsciously. Phlox noted her readings once more, and moved around, preparing another sedative hypo-spray dose.

"Topek, our mission leader, took us back to the Seleya," said T'Pol,

"in order to restock our food supplies, and get an overview of the situation, and what we found aboard the Seleya shocked us, and frankly, frightened us. The crew had turned into wolves, and only iron clad discipline, enforced with knives, stun batons, and phasers still kept order aboard the Seleya. They'd been inside the asteroid field for some three months, and we had no good news for them, but Captain Voris ordered our shuttle restocked, and sent us out there once more, most likely to keep us safe, for it was clear to me that he had given up hope. So off we went once more, for another three months."

T'Pol kept clawing at her thigh, and green blood now flowed from her flesh. Archer gently grasped her hand and T'Pol, realizing her action for the first time, made a fist, embarrassed by her lack of control.

"Captain," said Phlox. "Enough."

"It will only take a few seconds more to finish my story, Doctor," said T'Pol.

"Make it quick, T'Pol," said Phlox, and he was about to say more, but the door slid open, and Phlox saw Captain Tucker enter the Sick Bay.

"Hey, T'Pol," said Trip, with eyes only for the Vulcan. "It's good to see you again."

"Commander Tucker," said T'Pol. "A pleasure."

Commander Tucker's presence was a pleasure for Doctor Phlox as well, for he noted, interestingly, the Vulcan's physiological response to the commander's presence. The brainwave patterns which indicated her internal distress assumed a more controlled pattern, and if they were not normal, there was still a vast improvement. Her EKG readings, likewise. Oh, this was interesting!

"I hope you're feeling better," said Trip. "I came by here to check up on you several times, but this is the first time I've caught you awake."

"Doctor Phlox has chosen to sedate me," said T'Pol.

"And for good reason, T'Pol," said Phlox. "Now, finish up your story, because I plan to sedate you once more."

"Yes," said T'Pol. "As I was saying, the Seleya was lost in the Expanse for two months, and then trapped inside the asteroid field for six months more, while I, and the rest of the shuttle's crew spent only a matter of weeks inside the asteroid field. We were afraid to go back to the Seleya, for what contact we still had with the ship indicated that chaos and violence were the norm now, so we stretched out our food supply, hoping still for rescue from Vulcan, but finally, three weeks ago, we decided to reboard the ship, in search of food."

T'Pol sighed, and fell silent, clearly losing herself in the memory of it all. Finally, she spoke again.

"We docked our shuttle in the Launch Bay on Deck 8," said T'Pol, "and

made our way inside cautiously. It was a madhouse, but we managed to make our way to the kitchen storerooms undetected, mainly due to Topek's intimate knowledge of the ship. We grabbed all the food we could carry, and began to make our way back to the shuttle, but this time we were detected and swarmed, so we dropped the food and ran. Topek was captured, and hacked apart, while we kept running. We hid then, for days, while waiting for a chance to return to the shuttle, as we found the thought of a peaceful death aboard the shuttle more agreeable than being torn apart by Vulcans, turned feral."

"Jesus," said Trip, for given his experiences onboard the Seleya, he could picture T'Pol predicament quite easily given his time onboard the Seleya.

T'Pol made eye contact with the commander, read his compassion for her in his eyes, and gained strength from it.

"So we hid and waited, but when we finally made our way back to the Launch Bay, the door would not open. An asteroid had smashed into the Launch Bay, depressurizing it, and destroying our shuttle. Even if we had managed to find some EV suits, we had no shuttle to return to. So we went back to hiding, venturing out only now and then for food or water. Mi'Len disappeared while on such a foray, and then it was just V'Kar and I, but he began to succumb to the effects of the Trellium, becoming more and more volatile. He never returned from one of his scouting missions, so I do not know if he was captured, or killed, or simply lost himself to Trellium induced delirium, but I thought it wise to find a new hiding place, so made my way to Captain Voris' Ready Room, off the Bridge. That is where your boarding party found me."

"And that's where the story ends for now," said Phlox, ignoring the Captain's look, and injecting T'Pol with a sedative: the Vulcan went limp in seconds.

"What now, Captain?" said Trip.

"I hate to do this to you again, Trip," said Archer, "but I need you to go back to the Seleya, and bring back at least one of these affected Vulcans for Doctor Phlox to study. We need to see if we can do anything for them."

"No problem, Captain," said Trip. "I understand. I'll take Meyers with me, if you don't mind. He's a good man in a bind. Kelly too, but he's out of action."

"Take Meyers, and as many more MACOs as you can stuff inside a shuttle, even if you have to sit in each other's laps," said Archer.

"Right, sir," said Trip, turning to leave Sick Bay.

"Just a moment, Commander Tucker," said Phlox. "I'd like to speak to you and the Captain, while I have you together."

"What did you do, Trip?" said Archer.

"I didn't do anything," said Trip. "We're listening, Doctor."

"Yes, well, when you entered the room, and T'Pol fixed her eyes on

you, Commander Tucker," said Phlox, "her bio-readings took a very noticeable turn for the better. I suspect she has fixated on you, as the man who led the mission which rescued her off that ship and out of that dreadful situation. The end result was a marked reduction in her stress response and mental anxiety."

"Ok," said Trip. "That's understandable. So what?"

"We will verify that this was not an isolated event, when T'Pol wakes," said Phlox, "and if it is not, I would like to ask you, Commander Tucker, to spend as much time as possible with T'Pol, at least until the Trellium-D leaches out of her system, and I will ask you, Captain Archer, to allow the Commander to do so, so far as ship's business allows it."

"Doctor," said Archer, "T'Pol has been through enough, so if it helps, Trip can hold her in his arms, and rock her to sleep every night."

Trip started laughing at that hyperbole, and Archer grinned at it, but Phlox said, "Actually, that might be helpful, so I'm glad you're both willing to go above and beyond the call of duty for one of my patients."

"Count on it, Doc," said Trip. "Now I've got to go."

* * *

><p>T'Pol woke to find Doctor Phlox puttering about Sick Bay, humming as he fed a number of creatures scattered randomly about the place in small cages.<p>

"Do you ever sleep, Doctor?" said T'Pol.

Phlox smiled at seeing his patient wake, and laid down the feeding bowl, to come inspect T'Pol.

"My sleep cycle differs markedly from Vulcan, or Human norms," said Phlox, looking at T'Pol with a clinical eye.

She still looked exhausted, and her bio-markers were still abnormally elevated, but he could tell that at least she was no longer hallucinating, no longer hovering dangerously close to a psychotic episode, which was a good sign. However, her recovery could easily take months, and she was not out of the woods by any means.

"Would you care for something to eat?" said Phlox.

"No," said T'Pol, "but if Commander Tucker is available, I have some questions for him, about our time aboard the Seleya."

"He is not available, T'Pol," said Phlox. "He went back aboard the Seleya, an hour or so ago."

"WHAT?" said T'Pol, struggling to rise to a sitting position. "That is madness! Why?"

Phlox aided T'Pol to sit up, then plumped up a pillow and positioned it strategically behind her back so that she could rest comfortably, and said, "The captain ordered him to bring one of your fellow

crewmen to the Enterprise, so that I may determine the proper treatment to aid your crew. If any such treatment exists, that isâ€¦"

T'Pol was breathing deeply, thoroughly agitated. "He should have waited for me! My knowledge of the ship would be valuable."

"That is illogical, T'Pol, and you know it," said Phlox. "You are in no shape to return to the Seleya."

"I suppose you are right," said T'Pol. "Is he safe? Are they safe, I should have said, because Commander Tucker is too intelligent to go back aboard the Seleya alone."

"I do not know, T'Pol," said Phlox.

"Can you contact the Captain, and find out?" said T'Pol.

"Very well," said Phlox, and flipped a switch on the wall console. "Phlox to Bridge."

"Yes, Doctor," said Archer.

"Any word on Commander Tucker and the away mission?" said Phlox.

"They boarded the ship thirty minutes ago, Doctor," said Archer. "Nothing since then."

"Understood, Captain. Thank you," said Phlox, and returned back to T'Pol's side.

"I should be there with them," said T'Pol. "It is my duty."

"We should talk about something," said Phlox.

"What is that, Doctor?"

"If the away mission succeeds, they will return to the Enterprise with a one or two of your crewmen, T'Pol," said Phlox. "I need to study them here, in order to determine if I can help them, but I do not want you here in Sick Bay with them."

"I understand," said T'Pol, glad that the doctor had been the one to make that decision.

"Accordingly," said Phlox, "I have spoken to the Captain, and had quarters assigned to you with the crew. You will wear a wrist monitor, at all times, in order to keep me apprised of your bio-readings."

"Yes, Doctor," said T'Pol.

"Good," said Phlox. "I have taken the liberty of estimating your size, and I requisitioned a uniform and some underclothes for you, T'Pol. Please get dressed, and I'll show you your new quarters."

"Yes, Doctor," said T'Pol.

Ten minutes later T'Pol was dressed in a StarFleet coverall suit and

standard issue work boots.

"Ah, you look very nice, T'Pol," said Phlox, but considering that she'd come aboard in a torn, dirty and blood stained uniform, anything would have been an improvement.

"Thank you, Doctor. The clothes you picked out for me fit like a glove. You have the eye of a tailor."

"Actually, I have three wives," said Phlox, "so I've had plenty of practice sizing up clothing, and more than enough practice dodging the question, 'Does this dress make me look fat?' In any case, once you get settled in, you can go by the Quarter Master's office and pick up more clothes as you need them. Now, let me walk you to your quarters. They're not far from here."

"Yes, Doctor," said T'Pol.

As they walked the hallways, Doctor Phlox gave T'Pol a running commentary.

"Sick Bay and your Quarters are on Deck E," said Phlox. "The Galley, Mess Hall and Captain's Mess are also on this level, right that way, and Captain Archer has extended you an invitation to dine with him, if you feel up to it. The gymnasium and recreation facilities are on Deck C, as is the Science Lab. The Bridge and the Captain's Ready Room are on Deck A. You will learn the rest of the facilities in time."

"Understood, said T'Pol.

"Now these are your quarters," said Phlox, coming to a stop, and the door opened at the press of a button. "You can choose and set your own security code for the door, from your room's wall console."

They stepped inside and T'Pol took in her quarters with a glance. A good sized bunk, with built in bookshelves, a desk, walk in closet, a decently sized bathroom. Nothing fancy, but it was quite serviceable.

"I must leave you now, T'Pol. I must return to Sick Bay, in anticipation of Commander Tucker's return with some of your fellow crewmen."

"Yes, Doctor. Thank you. Please let me know if you can help my crew."

"Of course. You may be certain that I will keep you informed, T'Pol," said Phlox.

6. Chapter 6

â€œ**Chapter 06â€œ**

This time around, the away mission to the Seleya had gone smoothly. The away-team had taken their time, and spent forty minutes scanning the Seleya, and had confirmed ninety-six Vulcan life signs, and their precise location, before docking with the Seleya. They'd then made directly for a group of ten Vulcans, Trip, Meyers, and another four

MACOs, all armed to the teeth. They stunned all of the Vulcans quickly, then selected and returned three of them to the Enterprise's Sick Bay.

"How did it go this time?" said Archer, speaking to Trip as he stripped off his weapons and handed them to a crewman who would return them to a weapons locker.

"No problems," said Trip.

He was still shaken from seeing those Vulcans a second time, because once you faced them you were forced to realize that they had once been people, people now reduced to nothing but mindless savagery by the Trellium-D, and he doubted that Doctor Phlox could do anything for any of them, save T'Pol. She was the bright spot, the only bright spot, in this entire mess, and if she did not recover well, that would be devastating.

"Take the rest of the day off," said Archer. "Have dinner with me at 19:00 hours. I invited T'Pol as well."

"All right," said Trip.

Ten minutes later, he called Sick Bay from the wall console in his quarters, as he did not want to enter Sick Bay, and see the Vulcans he'd brought back to the Enterprise, unless T'Pol was awake.

"Yes, Commander Tucker," said Phlox. "Not a good time. What can I do for you?"

"Is T'Pol awake?"

"I moved her to 3G while you were gone," said Phlox.

"3G? That's next to my cabin," said Trip.

"Yes. Remember our discussion, Commander Tucker," said Phlox. "Now I must go."

Trip stepped across the hall, and pressed the chime button for T'Pol's cabin. A moment later, the Vulcan answered the door.

"You busy?" said Trip, noting that the Vulcan looked better, if still fragile, and troubled: that probably meant she knew that the other Vulcans were aboard.

"No," said T'Pol.

"After all you've been through you shouldn't spend all your time alone," said Trip. "Come on, let's do something."

T'Pol closed her door, and followed Commander Tucker into the turbo-lift, where she said, "Where are we going?"

"I saw a lot of square and rectangular coffee tables on the Seleya," said Trip. "You guys must drink lots of coffee, eh?"

"Hardly any," said T'Pol, "but we use those tables to hold our meditation candles, for reading, and for eating."

"I thought we'd make you one of those tables for your quarters," said Trip. "I have some beautiful rosewood, and it will do you good to keep busy, as well as provide you with something useful."

"All right," said T'Pol.

* * *

><p>Two hours later, after measuring, cutting, gluing, bonding wood to wood, they had a beautiful Vulcan style coffee table, minimalist and elegant, thirty-six inches wide on every side, twelve inches high. T'Pol, who had never done something like this, found the entire process of construction enjoyable, and working with Commander Tucker quite agreeable.<p>

"This is a beautiful wood, T'Pol, with great color and grain," said Trip. "You'll see how it pops, after I lacquer it."

"Yes," said T'Pol. "Thank you."

"Don't mention it," said Trip. "You need anything else to make your cabin tolerable?"

"I could use some candles, and a candle holder, for my meditation," said T'Pol. "If you know someone who has a spare candle or two, perhapsâ€"

"Don't sweat it," said Trip. "I can fix you up."

He took a four inch square block of copper, and hammered the exterior with a ball peen hammer, giving it a wonderful texture more akin to stone than metal, then buffed and polished the copper. He then removed half of the material from inside the block, to create a round hole two inches deep, and then glued a thin sheet of rubber on the opposite side of the hole, to keep the candle holder from slipping and sliding. Next, he melted a block of paraffin wax, poured out ten candles into a section of a properly sized pipe, using some shredded linen for the wicks, and once they cooled, tapped them out of the mold, for T'Pol.

"I am grateful," said T'Pol, in her hands a small box containing her candles, and the candle holder.

She wanted the Human to know how much she appreciated his kindness, but to say more would be unseemly.

"You're welcome. You'd better get a new uniform and clean up," said Trip, with a smile. "We eat with the Captain in forty-five minutes. I'll be right behind you, I just want to put the tools away."

They'd dined with the Captain, but Captain Tucker begged off to go peek in on Engineering as soon as they'd eaten, so Archer and T'Pol had spoken of the changes that had taken place while the Seleya was lost in the Expanse, and she learned of the Xindi attack on Earth and the ship's mission, and then they spoke of the Seleya, and the options on the table.

Afterwards, T'Pol returned to her quarters and attempted to meditate, but met with only limited success, and for the first time since she was a child, T'Pol wept, quite bitterly so, for the crew of the

Seleyaâ€ she tried to sleep then, but it was no use, and her agitation increased constantly for the next two hours, as she tossed and turned in the dark. Finally, she could stand it no more and crossed the hall in her t-shirt and pajama bottoms to ring Commander Tucker's door chime, and moments later he opened the door, wearing only pajama bottoms, and a sleepy look on his face.

"What's up, T'Pol?" said Trip, standing aside so that T'Pol could enter his quarters.

"I have a favor to ask," said T'Pol, looking up at the Human.

"So ask."

"May I spend the night here?" said T'Pol. "I can not be alone right now. I believe it is a side effect of the Trellium-D."

"Sure," said Trip. "You can watch a movie, or use my computer, listen to music, do some research, whatever you like, but I'm going to hit the sack."

"I will join you," said T'Pol, "if that is all right. I should try to sleep as well. I am exhausted."

"You do look tired, T'Pol," said Trip. "Come on."

She hated saying this after the commander's kindness, hated the implications of her words, for Commander Tucker had been nothing but honorable, but still T'Pol said, "I am not looking for a sexual encounter, Commander Tucker."

"I'm not offering one, T'Pol," said Trip, slipping into his bunk. "Good night."

"Good night, Commander Tucker," said T'Pol.

She then washed her face, and returned to Commander Tucker's bunk. The man was asleep, and T'Pol slipped in the bed with him, though separated by a foot or so of empty space. She tried emptying her mind, and surprisingly enough it worked, for she fell asleep. She woke once, in the middle of the night, at 03:30 hours. The light of the commander's alarm clock served as something of a night light, but she did not need one, to know what was happening. Commander Tucker slept on his back, and she was draped all over him. Her face rested on his shoulder, her arm on his chest, and her left leg was thrown over both his legs. It was unconscionable. She was treating the man as a six foot body pillow.

Even barely conscious, T'Pol thought, 'I should move. This is improper.'

But she did not want to move, and could not muster the will power to do so, and soon after T'Pol fell asleep once more. She woke again, two hours later, and this time, she was spooning the man, her torso pressed against his back, her left leg thrown possessively over his, once again. T'Pol knew that Commander Tucker had likely set his alarm clock for 06:00, so she held her position for another twenty minutes, basking in the man's body heat and agreeable scent, before withdrawing regretfully, to her side of the bed. Sure enough, the alarm went off at 06:00 hours.

Commander Tucker woke then, and T'Pol pretended to sleep, unwilling to deal with the awkwardness of facing the man after her admittedly inappropriate behavior. He showered, shaved, dressed, and through it all, T'Pol feigned sleep, save for the countless times when she peeked surreptitiously at the man, until eventually, perhaps inevitably, Commander Tucker turned suddenly while looking for his shoes, and caught T'Pol red handed as it were.

"Sorry to wake you, T'Pol," said Trip. "Sometimes I can't sleep, other times I can't wake, so I need the alarm clock."

"No need to apologize, Commander Tucker," said T'Pol. "Your shift starts early."

"Actually, I don't start work 'till 08:00 hours," said Trip. He sat on the bed in order to slip into his work boots, and then looked down at T'Pol, and said, "I'm having a lazy breakfast with Malcolm. He's got a technical problem with his torpedo launchers, and we need to figure it out, which means you can turn off the lights and go back to sleep."

"Yes," said T'Pol. "I apologize for imposing on you last night."

"Forget about it," said Trip. "With you here, I slept like a baby, so it was no imposition. Ok, go back to sleep. Doctor Phlox says your recovery necessitates plenty of sleep."

"Very well," said T'Pol.

She watched Commander Tucker leave his quarters, then buried her face in his pillow, and dozed in and out of consciousness for another hour or so. At 08:00 hours, T'Pol made the Bridge, feeling a bit out of place, but Captain Archer nodded to her genially.

"Good morning, T'Pol," said Archer. "It's good to see you up and around."

"Good morning, Captain."

"Attention," said Archer, and the Bridge officers stopped what they were doing, and looked at Archer. "Everyone, this is T'Pol, the Deputy Science Officer of the Seleya. T'Pol, you may remember Lt. Reed and Ensign Mayweather from the boarding party. The Comm officer is Ensign Hoshi Sato. Also present on the Bridge at the moment is Lt. Rostov from Engineering."

Everyone had nodded to T'Pol as they heard their name spoken, and T'Pol expressed her thanks to them all for their efforts to aid the Seleya.

"I can imagine why you're here, T'Pol," said Archer. "Let's go to my Ready Room."

"Yes, Captain," said T'Pol.

"Ensign Sato," said Archer on his way off the Bridge, "please ask Doctor Phlox to join us in my Ready Room."

"Yes, Captain," said Hoshi.

T'Pol followed Captain Archer to his Ready Room. Once inside Archer took his seat, and indicated that T'Pol should take a seat, and shortly afterwards, Phlox joined Archer and T'Pol. After brief greetings all around, Archer spoke.

"I know you've spent some time yesterday studying the Vulcan crewmen brought aboard the Enterprise, Doctor," said Archer.

"I worked through the night," said Phlox, "in order to have answers for Deputy Science Officer T'Pol."

"And?" said Archer.

"I am afraid that there is nothing I can do for the crewmen of the Seleya," said Phlox. "Their neural pathways are too badly degraded. They are already dying and they will all be dead in a matter of weeks, or months at the most. I can keep the Vulcans aboard the Enterprise sedated and comfortable until they expire, Captain, but I can not help them. I am sorry, T'Pol."

T'Pol nodded, misery visible on her face, for her control had been badly degraded by the horrors she'd been subjected to, as well as the Trellium in her body.

"Thank you, Doctor," said Archer. "Please make use of the Vulcan crewmen aboard our ship to learn everything you can of the effects of Trellium-D on the Vulcan mind and body. Perhaps that knowledge may save other Vulcan lives some day."

"Yes, Captain," said Phlox.

"Thank you for everything you've done to aid my crew, Doctor," said T'Pol, and Phlox nodded sadly, then left.

"I'm sorry, T'Pol," said Archer.

T'Pol said nothing, but her hands were visibly shaking.

"Given the situation we are in," said Archer, "with the Xindi threat hanging over Earth, I have to move on, T'Pol. I can't take the time to rescue those crewmen if they have no chance of living, and I can not return them home to Vulcan. My priority must be the Xindi, while Earth stand in danger."

"I completely understand, Captain," said T'Pol, "and I thank you and the Doctor for investigating the possibility of aiding the crew of the Seleya. As far as I know, I am the highest ranking officer of the Seleya still alive. On behalf of the High Command, I ask that you attach four photon torpedoes to the hull of the Seleya, and allow me to scuttle the ship."

Archer just looked at T'Pol.

"The crew can not be saved, and the ship can not be salvaged," said T'Pol. "I assure you, Captain, that it would be a kindness to terminate the suffering of the crew still living aboard the Seleya. I was considering my options for suicide when your men found me, so frightening and chaotic is the process from which they are all

suffering to a much greater degree than I."

Archer nodded his agreement, and said, "I'll let you know when it's done, T'Pol."

Three hours later, T'Pol detonated the photon torpedoes, putting an end to the process of destruction, a process which had begun the day that the Seleya entered the asteroid field in search of Trellium ore. Once she had performed her duty, as she saw it, T'Pol vanished from the Bridge.

* * *

><p>Phlox went to check on T'Pol later in the day, but she sent him away without seeing him, opening the doors to her cabin only when he threatened to involve security officers in order to gain entrance.<p>

"I apologize for intruding," said Phlox, accustomed to the cultural Vulcan mores of privacy, but his medical duty topped all else. "Commander Tucker told me that you would need your privacy, but in these circumstancesâ€|"

"You should have listened to him," said T'Pol. "Somehow, Commander Tucker understands me better than you, Doctor."

"Nevertheless, T'Pol," said Phlox, "I have my duty."

"I know," said T'Pol.

* * *

><p>No one but Phlox saw T'Pol for the next three days, and each day she looked worse, for she'd not slept, and had not eaten, and despite a Vulcan's superior stamina, Phlox grew concerned, and resolved to hospitalize T'Pol if she did not sleep or eat the next day. But that night T'Pol went to Captain Tucker's quarters once more, hollow eyed and bleak, and he wordlessly stepped aside to give her access. She moved then to the bed, and sat on it, and Trip knelt on the floor, so that their eyes might be at the same level.<p>

"Do you want to talk?" said Trip, his hands holding onto T'Pol's calves, right at the knee.

T'Pol just shook her head, brokenhearted.

Instinctively sensing what she needed, for he'd woken up several times during the night she'd spent with him, and he'd felt T'Pol holding onto him, Trip stood, kissed the top of T'Pol's head and crawled into bed. T'Pol did the same, then turned her back to him, shamed, for she'd begun to weep silently. A moment later, she felt Commander Tucker's body pressed against her's, as he spooned her, and embraced her.

"Let go," said Trip, just that, but it was enough.

T'Pol tried to resist Commander Tucker's advice, but she could restrain herself no longer and her tears flowed freely, between agonized moans. How long she grieved she did not know, but when T'Pol was done, she felt Commander Tucker's arms still embracing her.

"It wasn't your fault, T'Pol," said Trip. "None of this was your fault. I saw the horror the Seleya had become, and your act was a kindness."

"Tighter," said T'Pol.

Trip pulled her closer, and held her tighter, though wary of hurting her.

"Tighter," said T'Pol.

Trip's legs twined with T'Pol's, and he drew her so close to him that she could barely breathe, yet the tight bond he held on her was the only thing that felt real to T'Pol now, and it was the only thing which gave her comfort.

* * *

><p>The next day, a proud, but still pained T'Pol entered Captain Archer's Ready Room.<p>

"Take a seat, T'Pol."

"I prefer to stand, Captain."

"All right. What can I do for you?"

"I formally request permission to join your crew, in order that I might aid the Enterprise in the completion of its mission, Captain."

"I know you're kind of stuck with us, T'Pol," said Archer, "but you're still in bad shape, and you'll be so for months. You need rest."

"What I need, Captain, is to repay the debt of honor I owe you, the Enterprise, and StarFleet," said T'Pol.

"The High Command might take umbrage with you serving aboard a StarFleet vessel, T'Pol," said Archer. "They did not want us out here, and they did not offer any personnel for our excursion into the Expanse, T'Pol."

"I do not care, Captain," said T'Pol. "Please do not deny my request. I will be an asset to you, Captain. I swear it."

"I believe you, T'Pol," said Archer. "If I accept your offer, you'd likely be required to spend a fair amount of time with Trip in Engineering, T'Pol. A lot rides on his shoulders, and that load might seem a bit lighter, with someone to stand by him."

"Gladly, Captain," said T'Pol.

Archer stood, opened a safe and fished around for a small box, from which he drew out a studded pin, and then approached T'Pol, in order to pin his old command insignia at T'Pol's neck, then looked her in the eye.

"Ensign Hoshi will direct you to the Science Station," said Archer.

"Attend to your duties, Commander T'Pol."

7. Chapter 7

â€"Chapter 07â€"

The Enterprise had returned to Earth, just days past, and the footage of the ship's arrival was sobering sight for the people of Earth, for the videos and still photos of the ship's hull made it apparent that the Enterprise had gone through hell: phaser burns covered the hull, and in some sections the weapons had burned several decks into the hull, while in other places, gaping holes which went completely through the Enterprise had vented entire sections of the ship to the vacuum of space, and were indicative of photon torpedo damage, or perhaps some other cruel weapon of the Xindi. When all was said and done, the Enterprise would need a complete overhaul, months of repair work done round the clock, in order to be fit for duty again. It would have been cheaper to simply scrap her, but the ship had acquired symbolic status now, and so she would be rebuilt.

The entire planet had greeted the return of the Enterprise with cautious optimism, as no one believed that the Enterprise would have returned from the Delphic Expanse without completing its mission, for the Enterprise had been a ship crewed entirely by volunteers, each crew member resigned to the fact that this mission was most likely a suicide mission, and in fact, one third of the crew had fallen in the line of duty, and paid the ultimate price for Earth's safety. Still, despite the losses, the outpour of joy when StarFleet announced that Captain Archer had secured a peace treaty with the Xindi was unbelievable, with people literally dancing in the streets, and the celebration were still ongoing, a fact which the crew of the Enterprise had to watch from their video monitors, for the crew was placed on the top two floors of a first-class hotel near StarFleet's HQ, there to be debriefed and then attended to by a team of physicians, psychiatrists and StarFleet officers and the like, while their families were given passage through the crowds downstairs to visit with the crew, each and every one of them pampered shamelessly by the hotel's staff and caterers, regardless of their rank.

The adventures of the Enterprise were broken down on television for the public by StarFleet officers, and supplemented with data from the ship's video logs, and the entire matter followed avidly by the people of Earth, from the source of the conflict, the Guardians who had manipulated the Xindi into war with Earth, and then the defeat of the Guardians along with the schemes of the Xindi Reptilians and Insectoids by the combined actions of the Xindi Arboreals, Primates and Aquatics working in concert with Enterprise's crew. Speaking of the Enterprise's crew, it seemed that a beautiful Vulcan named T'Pol was counted among them now, a Vulcan of whom none of the people of Earth had heard of before, as she had not been a part of the initial crew which had departed Earth for the Delphic Expanse. When her story, and the story of the Seleya leaked out to the press, there was sympathy for T'Pol, as it did not take much work to vividly imagine the horrors of the Seleya's descent into hell, or the plight of the lovely Vulcan just barely hanging on to sanity, and life, in that environment.

And it was this Vulcan named T'Pol that now moved through the luxurious suite she'd been assigned by the hotel, in order to answer

a knock at her door, only to find Ambassador Soval and Admiral Te'Lok of the High Command, standing there. Both men gave the ta'al, the Vulcan hand greeting which involved raising the hand, and splitting the fingers into a V, and T'Pol returned the gesture. She stood aside, to grant them access to her suite, then invited them to sit, and brought hot tea to the table, for the staff of the hotel was quite attentive to the crew's needs, and in T'Pol's case, that meant good tea on hand, and water constantly hot in a delicate cast iron tea pot made in Osaka.

"Mmmmm," said Soval, after sampling the tea, "this tea is quite good, T'Pol."

"It is Ceylon tea," said T'Pol. "Grown in the highlands of the Ceylon Dominion of Sri Lanka. I understand the altitude, climate and mineral rich soil are the main contributors to the excellent taste."

"Interesting, but I did not come here to speak of tea," said Te'Lok, not rudely, for it was Vulcan custom to get to the heart of the matter, save for purely social events.

"Than what brought you here, Admiral?" said T'Pol.

Once, T'Pol would have been intimidated by a man of Te'Lok's rank, though she might have been disciplined enough to hide that fact, but now, it truly did not faze her, for T'Pol had been changed by her ordeal aboard the Seleya, and the subsequent trials of the Enterprise in the Expanse which she shared, part and parcel with the crew, and in the process T'Pol had been forged into something as strong and flexible as a fine steel sword.

"Two things brought me here," said Te'Lok. "I have reviewed the Enterprise's data of the Seleyaâ€|"

By this Te'Lok meant not just the sensor data of the Enterprise and the two shuttles which had surveyed the Seleya, but also the video feed from shuttles which had clearly revealed the extent to which the Seleya was damaged, and the video feed from the lapel cameras worn by the Human boarding parties as they fought their way through the Seleya, confronted by creatures that no longer seemed Vulcan to Te'Lok, and finally, video footage of the last few seconds of the Seleya, as she was torn apart, atom by atom, by the explosion which T'Pol had initiated.

"And so?" said T'Pol, calmly, as she'd long since made her peace with the decision to scuttle the Seleya.

"I have forwarded a copy of all that data to the High Command, along with my highest commendation for your actions," said Te'Lok. "You acted properly, and logically, under the most trying of circumstances, T'Pol."

T'Pol nodded, and left it at that.

"I have also recommended a promotion to captain for you, T'Pol," said Te'Lok, "so imagine my surprise when I was informed that you had resigned your commission with the High Command, in order to serve StarFleet. I understand you have already petitioned the Admiralty Commission to induct you into StarFleet."

"I thank you for your commendation, nevertheless, Te'Lok," said T'Pol. "The fate of the Seleya weighed on me, and it is humbling to hear my actions vindicated by a man of your experience."

"So why resign from the High Command, T'Pol?" said Te'Lok. "Why join StarFleet, when you have a bright future with the High Command? On the surface, your actions seemâ€¦ illogical."

"It is not a matter of logic, or illogic, Te'Lok," said T'Pol. "It is a matter of honor, and duty, for the aid which the Enterprise attempted to render the Seleya. The Enterprise spent valuable time in making that effort to aid us, the boarding parties risked their lives and gave me my life in return, and their doctor gave me sanity, at least in part. In view of those sacrifices, my career is nothing in the balance."

"Your words are honorable, T'Pol," said Te'Lok, "but you have served aboard their ship, quite well I am told, and in the process, you have played a part in saving their planet. You have more than repaid that debt."

"The debt I owe the Enterprise, and StarFleet by extension, can never be fully repaid, Te'Lok," said T'Pol, "though I aim to repay at least a small part of that debt with my service, Admiral."

Te'Lok saw the finality of T'Pol's words reflected in her eyes, and stood. T'Pol stood as well, and then Te'Lok gave the ta'al.

"You bring honor to your people," said Te'Lok, "and your people honor you, T'Pol."

"I live to serve," said T'Pol, and walked Te'Lok to the door, then took her seat again, facing Soval.

"Do you realize," said Soval, as he topped off their cups of tea with hot tea from the teapot, "that you have done more for our diplomatic relations with Humans, given your service onboard the Enterprise, than I have done in the past ten years?"

"You exaggerate beyond all reason, Soval," said T'Pol.

"And yet I tell you truly that I do not exaggerate, T'Pol," said Soval. "Although the Humans have been grateful for the assistance we've given them in the past, relations between us have always been somewhat distant, and sometime strained, but now Humans smile at us, and go out of their way to be helpful and associate with us, where before they often held us at arm's length, either put off by our supposed lack of emotions, or intimidated by our physical advantages, or scornful that we did not aid them when their planet was in danger, yet all that, wiped away, by the fact that you shared the Enterprise's suffering and helped complete their mission."

"Well, I can not answer to that, Soval," said T'Pol. "I did what was right, and if it benefited our two peoples, so much the better."

"Indeed," said Soval. "I hope that you and I can continue our association through the years, T'Pol. I find you quite interesting."

"We have met before, Soval," said T'Pol, with a wry turn of her lips, "so if you do not remember me, I could not have been all that interesting."

"I remember meeting the prim and proper Deputy Science Officer of the Seleya, T'Pol," said Soval, "when I was transported to Risa by the Seleya. You had just received your promotion, I believe."

"I see," said T'Pol.

"Yes, T'Pol," said Soval. "You impressed me, as being a proper Vulcan. Now you interest me, as being something more. Your suffering in the Expanse, and your time with the Humans have changed you, T'Pol, possibly for the better, I think."

The ambassador's slight smile made T'Pol gape at the man.

"Was that a joke, Ambassador?"

"You are imagining things, T'Pol."

"Perhaps," said T'Pol, resolved now to keep her eye on Soval: it might be that his time on Earth had changed the ambassador, just as her time in the Expanse had changed her.

* * *

><p>T'Pol and Soval spoke for another two hours for the professional chemistry between them was notable, and T'Pol thought that she would have done well with Soval as her mentor, had her career progressed along different channels. Ah, wellâ€|<p>

Soon after Soval had departed, T'Pol opened her suite's door, exercising stealth where none was necessary, and peeked out into the hallway, first one way, and then the other, before moving with the stealth of a feline two doors down from her suite, and once there, she tapped the card which Commander Tucker had given her against his doorknob, and was granted access, only to find Commander Tucker in kitchen, fiddling around with a blender. He was bumming around in t-shirt, shorts and socks, and yet T'Pol found him ravishing.

"Who are you, and what are you doing in my suite?" said Trip, smiling at T'Pol through the large pass-through window in the kitchen wall. "I asked the service for a Laotian woman with a limp."

"You know very well who I am, Commander Tucker," said T'Pol, taking a seat on a barstool just outside the pass-through window, "and what I'm doing here."

"Well, I'll have to ask you to leave just the same, T'Pol," said Trip. "I was kidding about the Laotian woman, but Hoshi is coming by any minute, and I've promised her a hot oil massage."

"You must have grown weary of your life, to make such jokes, Commander Tucker."

Trip just grinned at her, and if T'Pol's implied threat fazed him, it did not show on his face.

"Mango smoothie?" said Trip. "Or avocado?"

"Avocado, please," said T'Pol. "After you apologize."

"For what?" said Trip, an innocent look on his face.

"Apologize," said T'Pol blandly.

To Trip, the very neutrality with which T'Pol had requested an apology was as much a warning as the sound of a rattler shaking it's tail! He might not be able to read all Vulcans, though he'd gotten much better at it since meeting T'Pol, but he could read her like a book, and she was not going to let his wisecrack about rubbing Hoshi down pass, ever, unless he apologized.

"I apologize," said Trip, a winning smile on his face, then proceeded to make the smoothies.

An avocado smoothie would have sounded strange to him, before he'd started haunting Vietnamese sandwich shops, but now he had an insatiable thirst for them, as did T'Pol, so he doubled up on the portions. Water, avocados, a touch of sugar, and then he reached for his secret ingredients. A half teaspoon of guar gum, and a quarter teaspoon of xanthan gum. The guar gum made the smoothies creamy and silky by trapping and incorporating tiny pockets of air in the smoothie, while the xanthan gum gave it a bit of body, so the air molecules would not be quickly broken down, and the guar's creaminess lost.

After pouring the smoothies into two glasses, Trip dusted them both with a bit of cardamom powder and a touch of coconut sugar. T'Pol watched this entire ritual with mild amusement. To a logical Vulcan, food was a matter of nutritional intake, and though Vulcans took care with aesthetics and presentation, Commander Tucker raised both of those factors to an art, and a fetish. It was unnatural, the care which this man lavished on food— Still, he showed the same devotion, the same obsession, in other aspects of life, aspects of life which benefited her quite directly behind closed doors, so perhaps it would be best not to rock this boat by teasing the man, lest he take her criticism personally, and allow this aspect of his personality to fall into neglect. T'Pol did not wish to think of that happening, for the consequences would be terrible where her pleasure was concerned, so much so that she would rather be torn to bits by an Alaskan brown bear, than think of that— Tasting the smoothie, and sighing appreciatively, T'Pol wisely kept her mouth shut.

"You like?" said Trip.

"Yes," said T'Pol.

They finished their shakes, while making small talk, then Commander Tucker came round the kitchen to answer his comm unit. He spoke briefly to Captain Archer, then turned to T'Pol.

"So what's up, T'Pol?" said Trip. "Did you come by to watch another wildlife documentary?"

They'd watched a 'Wildlife of Alaska' documentary the previous night, and then Commander Tucker had insisted on showing T'Pol how an Alaskan brown bear brought down elk by nibbling on her ears, pulling

her hair, and rolling her onto her back, before pouncing atop T'Pol, and nuzzling her neck to indicate the bear's savage attack, and then pulling off her clothes to indicate, somethingâ€¦ T'Pol forgot what. All in all, the bear's attack as demonstrated by Commander Tucker had seemed to be an inefficient process for a predator to take in pursuit of prey, to T'Pol at least, who was used to the brutal efficiency of Vulcan predators, but still, she had no complaints over the demonstration. None at all.

"I came because I wished to see you, Commander Tucker," said T'Pol, standing, and then stepping well inside Trip's personal space: their faces were only separated by 6.4 inches, estimated, and she expected a kiss for her trouble.

"It's always a pleasure to see you, T'Pol," said Trip with a smile, and then stepped back from T'Pol, increasing the distance to some two feet.

Mmm, hmmmm, thought T'Pol, so it is going to be like that, is it?

The man had a thousand ways to torture her, and this was his earliest maneuver. After she had scuttled the Seleya and ended the lives of ninety-six Vulcans, T'Pol had frankly been a mess. She did her duty to the Enterprise, then retreated to her room to meditate for hours, the only bright spots in her day and night, being the time she spent in Engineering and her meal times with Commander Tucker, or late in the night, when she inevitably made her way to his quarters in order to slip into bed with the man. After the third night in a row that she'd showed up at his door, he'd simply added her to the room's security settings, allowing the Vulcan to enter his room day or night with just the imprint of her thumb on a electronic reader, and that gesture gratified T'Pol.

What most definitely did not gratify T'Pol, came after a month or so, when through meditation, she moved into acceptance that what had to be with the Seleya, simply had to be, and no purpose was served in suffering over that fact any longer. So, that very night, T'Pol had come into the Commander's quarters to find the man listening to music, as he dried his hair with a towel, and she reacted instinctively, stepping well inside the commander's personal space and looking up at him, wide eyed and innocent, and yet nothing happened. Thinking that perhaps she was expressing her interest in a manner which he did not understand, T'Pol rested her hands on his bare chest, stood on her tip toes, and brushed his lips, with hers, and then it all went sideways from there. The commander grasped her wrists and stepped back, even though T'Pol saw that his face was flushed, and her sensitive sense of smell picked up the pheromones which accompanied the commander's sexual excitement.

Confused, T'Pol had looked at the man, and said, "What? What is wrong?"

That was a good question, so far as T'Pol was concerned. For the past thirty some days, at least, she'd crawled into this man's bed each night. He'd held her, comforted her, he'd spoken to her in gentle tones when she'd awoken screaming in the dark from nightmares in which she was still trapped aboard the Seleya, or in which she destroyed the Seleya once againâ€¦ he'd done all that and more, and now, when she had something good to offer the man as partial

repayment for his kindness, now, he stepped back!? It was not right! More so, it was not logical!

"What is it?" she'd said.

"It's too soon, T'Pol," had said the commander. "You'll do something you'll regret, and it will ruin us."

"I do not believe a simple kiss will 'ruin us', Commander Tucker."

"Let's wait."

That unpleasant game had gone on for several days, until T'Pol had resolved to take matters into her own hands, and slipped into Commander Tucker's quarters one night, stripped naked and slipped onto the bed with the man, and then proceeded to gain his attention. He woke quickly enough, and noticed T'Pol laying naked atop the covers, the hint of a smile on her face, brow raised in a challenge. Shaking the sleep from his eyes, and taking note of what T'Pol's hands were doing to him, Trip's eyes narrowed.

"Uh, huh. Ok. All right, T'Pol. If this is what you want, fine," said Trip, a fire in his eyes now, "but you're going to regret this."

"I do not think that I will, Commander Tucker," she'd said, and she'd been right: she had not regretted a single moment since then.

Snapping back to the present, T'Pol said, "Do not be like that, Commander Tucker. We are friends. Special friends. Do you not want to be my friend?"

"Sure," said Trip, then stepped aside when T'Pol stepped forward once again, only to find himself trapped between his desk, and T'Pol. "I have lots of friends. Jon, Malcolm, Hoshi, Travê€"

T'Pol silenced him by locking lips with Trip, then said, "You really should stop teasing me like that, Trip. It's cruel."

"You know you like it," said Trip. "Say it!"

"No."

"Say it!"

"I like it! There, are you happy now?"

"Yes, I am," said Trip, with a smile. "Are you?"

"Yes."

* * *

><p>***I meant to end this story with chapter 6, but some people indicated that this AU setting still had some life to it, so here goes. Rishooter, Bri, Snowman and Turner, I'll extend the story line, and hopefully answer some questions for Belen in the process, who keeps me honest through the most stringent reviews of my plot lines, along with the analytical focus and detachment of a Kolinahr master.

I hope you guys enjoy the story's extension.<p>

8. Chapter 8

â€"Chapter 08â€"

The next morning, T'Pol sneaked back to her suite though God only knew why she bothered. Aboard the Enterprise, every member of the crew knew almost immediately that T'Pol slept in Commander Tucker's quarters every night, and while Doctor Phlox's explanation that T'Pol was simply unable to sleep alone due to the anxiety brought on by Trellium poisoning bought Trip and T'Pol some time, there came a point where such excuses no longer held any validity, for it was clear that the two went out of their way to spend time together, and more so, the longer they knew each other, the more intimate their exchanges seemed even in public: private jokes, lingering glances, an 'accidental' touch here and there. No, although T'Pol's body language was more subtle than Trip's and so gave T'Pol a bit more deniability, no one aboard the Enterprise was fooled. As for their present circumstances, well, it did not differ in the least, for just as a ship had no secrets, neither did a hotel, and though the female staff was all atwitter over the romance between the handsome Commander Tucker, and the cool, restrained T'Pol, their 'secret' romance was considered a private matter.

As it was, T'Pol knew none of this, and so she congratulated herself on her cunning and her stealth, as she'd done since ever since she and Commander Tucker began their relationship, and as she began removing her clothes, T'Pol lost herself in thought.

When did we start our relationship? Is there a clear cut answerâ€| Was it during our first sexual encounter? Or was it even before that, during the nights I woke screaming desperately as I relived the horror of the Seleya, only his touch, and the sound of his voice bringing me out of the madness of my mindâ€| Or was it earlier still, when I lunged at him with knife in hand, and then retreated when defeated, only to be startled by the sight of the bluest eyes I had ever seen: they were my first hint that something had changed aboard the Seleya. Or was it perhaps later, when I thought him lost forever and I was sick with worry, and only Sim's brave sacrifice brought Trip back to meâ€|

Snapping out of it, T'Pol sighed. No time to dredge up the past. She had things to do today. She finished stripping, then showered and clothed herself in the dress uniform StarFleet had provided for her, though she was not yet officially StarFleet. That would be rectified this day. She met Commander Tucker, and they soon fell in step with Captain Archer, the three soon followed by the rest of the Bridge crew, and then still more crew members of the Enterprise, until the entire crew of the Enterprise, was herded through the hotel, through the throngs outside and into a dozen limousines, all headed for StarFleet's open air auditorium, which was packed to maximum capacity, while another hundred thousand people thronged outside to view the large monitors which would display the proceedings inside. This crowd roared with delight as the limos passed through their lines and into the auditorium, and T'Pol took in the spectacle with amused detachment. A Vulcan crowd would never be this chaotic, but the joy she noted in the faces in the crowd as the limo passed them by, was gratifying to see. It was good that she had contributed, in a

small part, to saving this planet from the Xindi's wrath.

Admiral Forrest knew very well that he was not the focus of the crowd, so after a brief introduction he called on Captain Archer, and the crowd roared their approval, only to fall silent when the captain commended the fallen from among the crew, and then the still living crew members, ending with the dozen some officers of the ship, and when he got to T'Pol the crowd rose to its feet once more and roared its approval once again. A short swearing in ceremony, and then T'Pol was StarFleet, followed by a special commendation for Doctor Phlox and another standing ovation which rivaled T'Pol's, and then more speeches by members of the crew, of which Trip's was generally acknowledged to be the most amusing, for the man could whip up a Southern accent and any number of gut busting stories at the drop of a dime.

A last good bye from the crew to the crowd, followed by a standing ovation and roar of approval which lasted until every limo had disappeared from sight, all headed for StarFleet's HQ building, and a meeting with the Admiralty Commission, which congratulated them all personally and pinned insignias of rank and promotion at their collars, along with a generous number of medals, for a well deserving crew. Once this private ceremony was concluded, each member of the Enterprise was granted four months of leave, and promised a great deal of latitude in the selection of their new assignments, once their leave was concluded.

The promotions handed out had been sweeping. Crewmen promoted to Ensigns, Ensigns to Lieutenants, Lieutenants to Commanders, Commander Tucker to Captain, and Captain Archer to Rear-Admiral, which was a bit premature, but not by much, given the man's achievements and long history of service to the fleet. As for T'Pol, she retained the rank of Commander, bestowed on her by Captain Archer, but smart money thought she'd be promoted to Captain after a couple of years with the fleet.

* * *

><p>"Well, it's been nice knowing you, T'Pol," said Captain Tucker, much later that evening, after dining with the Bridge officers over a lengthy meal, and tossing back a pint or two afterwards. "We should savor these last days together."<p>

The lithe Vulcan was mounted atop the man's back, and applying some of her specialized knowledge in the art of Vulcan neuro-pressure to relieve tension and bring focus to the man, in preparation for the continuation of the day's festivities into the night.

"What do you mean, Captain Tucker?" said T'Pol. "I was informed that we would be able to choose our own assignments and postings, when we return from our leave, as a reward for the strenuous nature of our mission in the Expanse, and the successful completion of that mission."

"And so?" said Trip, using T'Pol's typical response, and arching brow in fair imitation of the Vulcan.

"And so I will request assignment under your command," said T'Pol.

"I don't think that would be wise, T'Pol," said Trip. "Rather, we should treasure the memories of our passionate fling in the Expanse as we move on to other relationships anâ€" "

T'Pol pressed a particular nerve ending in just the right way, and Trip yelped, as he'd felt the sensation of thousands of ants crawling on his body for a second, and then T'Pol bent down and bit his left ear gently.

"So," said T'Pol, "what are we doing with our leave? Going to see your parents? They should meet me. I will do my best to leave them with a good impression."

Trip's father had just undergone surgery when the Enterprise had returned, and Trip's parents had been unable to visit Trip with the other families, so it was up to Trip to visit them.

"No," said Trip, "I want to wait a bit, until the media circus dies down."

"So what than?" said T'Pol. "I have been curious about this Tahiti."

"I don't know about you," said Trip, "but I scored a couple of cabins to Vulcan, and you may not know this about me, but I love desert planets."

"Truly?"

"No, I hate them, but I have a feeling that Vulcan is going to be different."

"I am certain that you will love Vulcan," said T'Pol, excited, "and I am overdue for a visit home. My mother, T'Les, will be displeased with my decision to leave the High Command for StarFleet, but I am certain that you will charm her, as you have charmed me."

"Whoa, whoa, T'Pol," said Trip. "You want me to meet your mom? That's a big step."

"It must happen eventually, Captain," said T'Pol. "Family is very important to a Vulcan. You must dig deep and find the strength to meet my mother, and my clan."

"Why exactly must I do that, T'Pol?"

The Vulcan looked back at Trip with a skeptical look, and shook her head sadly as if acknowledging to herself that the man she'd chosen was truly dim witted, then said, "Must I truly explain that to you, Captain Tucker?"

"Only if you want me to understand."

"Be strong, Captain Tucker," said T'Pol, falling off Trip's back in order to curl up next to him, head on shoulder, hand on chest, leg tossed over possessively over the man. "What must be, must be. You can not avoid your destiny, and I am your destiny."

"What must be must be. You can not avoid your destiny," said Trip in a goofy voice, then laughed. "Yeah, ok, T'Pol. You're such a

spaz!"

"To deny my words is to deny your very soul, Captain Tucker!"

Trip laughed at that even harder, and said, "Deny your very soul... Ok, I think you're having a stroke, or a seizure or something, T'Pol."

"Actually, I heard Crewman Morgan speaking to her fiance in such poetic words, and they seemed to be effective," said T'Pol, "so I thought to duplicate them, for your pleasure, and my gain."

"Well, good job, T'Pol. After hearing those words I want to marry you."

"Really?"

"No."

"I am beginning to hate you, Captain Tucker, and Vulcans should not allow such emotions to take root in their psyche."

* * *

><p>Once their journey actually began, the passage to Vulcan started off dashingly for them both. Good cabins on the Vulcan passenger liner were upgraded to first class cabins, once T'Pol was recognized, as the story of the Seleya had been widely noted on the Vulcan newsnets. The accommodations were first class, and the cooks fantastic. Trip even struck up an unexpected though agreeable association with an aged Vulcan, formerly an engineer stationed aboard a now obsolete D'Tek'Far class patrol cruiser, and he and Trip spoke for hours at a time, while T'Pol meditated, and fretted over the inevitable meeting with her mother, for their relationship had not always been easy, and despite her wishes no trip lasts forever. The ship reached Vulcan, and T'Pol sighed. Time to face the music.<p>

9. Chapter 9

â€"Chapter 09â€"

Trip and T'Pol made their way on Vulcan under a red sky towards T'Pol's childhood home, the shuttle drawing ever closer to the planet's surface.

"I wonder what the Columbia is doing in Vulcan's orbit," said T'Pol, for they'd seen the StarFleet vessel from the porthole of their passenger liner.

"I don't know," said Trip. "I'll give Erika a call later."

"Erika?" said T'Pol, head swiveling neatly in order to fix eyes on Captain Tucker. "You refer to Captain Hernandez by her first name?"

"I've known Erika for a long time," said Trip. "We're good friends."

"How good?" said T'Pol.

Trip snorted, and said, "How much longer to your mom's house?"

"We will get there, when we get there, Captain Tucker," said T'Pol, "but you never answered my question."

"Erika and I are good friends, T'Pol," said Trip. "Her and Jon have had an on-and-off thing for a long time, and I've known Erika for almost as long as Jon. Now, have you finished your interrogation, Grand Inquisitor T'Pol."

"For now," said T'Pol, mollified somewhat. "Oh, here we go. That is my mother's house."

Ten minutes more to reach the landing pad and disembark, another ten to make their way to T'Pol's childhood home, and eventually, they stepped through the entryway of a small but neatly put together courtyard.

"Hmmm," said Trip, looking appreciatively at the sparsely decorated courtyard. "Not like I imagined it, but it's beautiful."

"Vulcans appreciate beauty, Captain Tucker," said T'Pol.

"I never doubted that," said Trip with a grin for T'Pol. "You always were a snazzy dresser."

T'Pol spun at that, perhaps a touch nervous to be back home, and torn between desire and proper Vulcan etiquette.

"Captain Tucker, I suggestâ€" " said T'Pol, then froze part way through her thought, as she'd glimpsed her mother approaching, and heard her voice.

"You didn't tell me that you were bringing a guest," said T'Les, eyeing them both intently.

Trip returned T'Les' look in kind, as he'd often wondered what kind of woman would produce a daughter like T'Pol, and T'Les was not what he'd expected. Where T'Pol radiated poise, T'Les radiated authority, and where T'Pol was often uncertain where emotional matters were concerned, Trip doubted that T'Les had ever been uncertain about anything.

"Mother," said T'Pol, "you're home."

"Obviously," said T'Les, looking at T'Pol. "It's agreeable to see you. You appear well."

Sensing some unease from T'Pol, Trip drew T'Les' attention from T'Pol.

"I'm Charles Tucker. Pleased to meet you, ma'am."

He gave T'Les the ta'al, and T'Les returned it a touch ironically, somehow taking in Trip with a glance containing more than a hint of disapproval, which was a neat trick, as her face was largely neutral.

T'Les addressed T'Pol in Vulcan, "Why is he here?"

"Captain Tucker is my colleague," said T'Pol in the same tongue. "He wanted to visit Vulcan."

T'Les fixed T'Pol with a look that took T'Pol back to her childhood, and then said in Vulcan still, "Yes. I am certain that is the entirety of the reason you have brought him here, T'Pol."

T'Pol had no reply, so Trip said, "I don't mean to intrude, but if T'Pol did not check with you before inviting me here, I'll take the shuttle back to the Ke'Phor District. T'Pol, I'll get in touch with you when I get a hotel room. Maybe we can have lunch tomorrow."

"Nonsense," said T'Les. "If I've been rude, I apologize. Please. The guest room is on the south end of the house."

Trip looked at T'Les and considered leaving anyway, as he'd be more comfortable in a hotel, without the family tensions, but it would mean leaving T'Pol at her mother's mercy, and T'Pol had a slightly panicked look, most likely sharing that same thought.

"Thank you, ma'am," said Trip.

He picked up his bags, managing to give T'Pol a wink, head turned slightly askew so that T'Les would not witness that illogical act, and headed for the guest room. T'Pol and her mother followed Trip inside the house, and T'Les touched T'Pol's forearm, in order to garner her attention.

"Koss heard you were arriving on Vulcan today," said T'Les.

"And how did that happen?" said T'Pol.

"I am certain that I don't know, T'Pol," said T'Les, "but nevertheless, he's coming here at 19:00 hours to speak to you."

"Send him away," said T'Pol. "I have nothing to say to him."

"He is your fiancé," said T'Les.

"Former fiancé," said T'Pol.

"That is a matter for debate," said T'Les. "It would be wise for you to speak with him."

"Send him away," said T'Pol, steel in her voice.

"I will not. If you want him gone, you deal with him," said T'Les, and walked into the kitchen, leaving T'Pol with her thoughts. "He will be here quite soon."

"Fine," said T'Pol. "I will speak to Koss, and you will take Captain Tucker to dinner."

"Will I?" said T'Les.

"You will, if you expect me to speak with Koss," said T'Pol. "Push me

on this, and I'll take my leave of you now, before I have even unpacked my bags."

"Very well," said T'Les. "Tell Captain Tucker that we leave in half an hour."

T'Pol nodded, and sought out Captain Tucker in the guest room. The man had taken the opportunity to shower, shave and change his clothes, and T'Pol longed to taste his lips, but her impending meeting with Koss had aggravated her.

"Mom's not too thrilled to have me here, eh?" said Trip with a smile.

"She is just being difficult in order to annoy me," said T'Pol. "It forms the basis of our relationship."

"Some things are universal, T'Pol," said Trip. "So what's up?"

"I have a favor to ask."

"So ask," said Trip.

"Take my mother to dinner," said T'Pol. "I have something to attend to, and I will join you two afterwards, at the restaurant."

"Oh?" said Trip, sensing T'Pol irritation.

"Yes, it is a Vulcan thing," said T'Pol. "I can explain later if you like, but it is nothing to concern you."

"Anything I can do to help you out with this thing?"

"No, Captain," said T'Pol. "I will deal with it."

* * *

><p>"This is a nice place, T'Les," said Trip, once they'd been seated and he'd taken a look around the dining room.<p>

T'Les had chosen a restaurant named the Golden Shavokh, it was a fairly small, but elegant restaurant. Quite cozy too.

"It's been in operation for some three hundred years," said T'Les, "always by the family U'Rik."

The waiter had taken their order and returned now with their drinks. Redweed tea for T'Les, coffee for Trip.

"I didn't realize coffee was available on Vulcan," said Trip.

"You will find a great deal of variety on Vulcan, much off it from our colonies, or the result of off-planet trade with alien species," said T'Les.

"I see," said Trip. "And what is a Shavokh?"

"You are a curious little beast, aren't you?" said T'Les, and for the first time since she'd met the Human, T'Les took some interest in the man. "A shavokh is a small Vulcan hawk if you will, a winged

predator. Now, I've answered your questions, so perhaps you'll answer some of mine, Captain Tucker."

"Sure," said Trip.

"Are you involved with my daughter?"

"Yes."

T'Les sighed at that, and said, "She's not right for you."

"I disagree."

"She was always a difficult child. Much too emotional. She would make a difficult mate, Captain Tucker."

"Difficult? When I first met T'Pol, she tried to carve my face off with a knife," said Trip. "Now that was difficult."

"This must have been shortly after she was brought aboard from the Seleya, no?" said T'Les.

"No, this was when I found her on the Seleya," said Trip. "I wouldn't advise you to try and pressure her into leaving me. It might not work out as well as you'd expect. She has quite a rebellious streak."

T'Les scoffed at that, and said, "You're telling me? She's my daughter. I know very well the devilish streak in her!"

Against her wishes, T'Les found delight in the fact that she'd found someone at last, who understood the stubborn and contrary nature hidden beneath her daughter's sweet face, and the mutual commiseration between her and Captain Tucker was satisfying.

Trip laughed, and said, "Devilish? Since our first unfortunate encounter, T'Pol's been agreeably pleasant, unfailingly loving, and deliciously eager to fulfill my desires."

The man had a nice laugh. Such open amusement was not something a Vulcan would publicly display, but it was a pleasant thing to note in others.

"Quiet before the sand storm, Trip," said T'Les, beginning to truly like this man a touch, despite her desires, "quiet before the sand storm."

The waiter approached then with two smoking hot salt blocks three inches thick, fourteen inches one way, ten inches the other way, and placed one next to each diner, then laid down two covered trays as well, removing the lids before leaving. T'Les' tray held a variety of vegetables, textured plant proteins, and synthetic proteins, while Trip's tray held the same vegetables, along with a variety of marbled meats, sliced thinly. That caused confusion.

"I know Vulcans don't eat meat these days," said Trip, "so how do you come to serve it in your restaurants, T'Les?"

"It's something of a compromise with the outside worlds," said T'Les. "The meat is grown from single cells, in food laboratories if you

will."

"What?"

"Yes," said T'Les, tossing a large marinated mushroom cap on the salt block, along with some seasoned tofu, imported from Earth. "The cells are attached to large microfiber mesh sheets and submerged into a nutritive bath of fluids which provide the cells with the energy needed to increase in number, and create tissue," said T'Les. "The mesh is stretched daily, providing the same stimulus which normal movement provides in animals, so that the growing muscle fiber assumes the texture and firmness of genuine animal meat."

"I'll be damned," said Trip.

"Since no conscious life is taken to produce this meat, there are even Vulcans who consume it," said T'Les, "though their numbers are small."

"I see," said Trip, distracted by the heat he felt pouring off the salt block.

He laid down a few small peppers and sliced onions, and watched with fascination as they began to smoke and sear, distracted from the process for a moment as the waiter returned with some two dozen sauces and dips, as well as a basket of hot from the oven flatbreads.

"The salt block is soaked in plosek oil once it is heated," said T'Les. "It has a very high smoking point, and it soaks into the salt block, lubricating the surface, while providing a pleasing taste. You should add the meat now. Your pepper and onions are almost finished."

"Right," said Trip.

He flipped his veggies, then added two strips of well marbled meat. It sizzled and smoked immediately, when it hit the hot salt block, and gave off a wildly delicious smell.

Almost perfect, thought Trip, and the waiter must have thought he same, as he brought two plates with Basmati rice for them. Trip watched T'Les expertly scoop her seared vegetables and tofu off the salt block onto the rice, and he did the same, then followed T'Les' lead once more, and added more food to the now empty salt block. A few pointers from T'Les on the various sauces and then they both tucked into the food.

"Oh, my, God," said Trip, moaning with pleasure.

Despite herself, T'Les gave a slight smile. This Human was amusing. They ate in silence for a while, then T'Les spoke.

"Do you know what T'Pol is doing tonight, Captain Tucker?"

"Call me Trip."

"All right, Trip," said T'Les, surprising Trip, given T'Pol's initial reluctance to use his nickname. "So, do you know?"

"No. She said it was a Vulcan thing, and promised to tell me later if I was truly curious."

"She is meeting her fiance."

"What?" said Trip, heart involuntarily racing.

"T'Pol is engaged, Trip."

"I don't believe you," said Trip.

"And yet it's true."

"Nothing personal, but I'll hear it from T'Pol, before I believe it," said Trip.

"Oh, she will deny it," said T'Les, "but it's true, and there are rituals that can compel T'Pol to Bond with him."

Trip had studied what data was available on Vulcan marriages, so he was familiar with the concept of psychic bonds, and other assorted rituals associated with the Vulcan mating cycle.

"The kunat kal-if-fee," said Trip.

"Precisely," said T'Les, impressed that Trip was knowledgeable on the topic. "You should perhaps ask yourself now if facing Koss in battle for T'Pol is worth your life. You would face overwhelming odds. Be smart, Trip. Step back from T'Pol."

Trip smiled, but it was a cold smile, beneath slitted eyelids, and for the first time since she'd met the man, T'Les was intimidated by him.

"That's not gonna happen, T'Les," said Trip. "She belongs to me!"

* * *

><p>At 19:00 hours on the dot, a chime sounded, announcing Koss. T'Pol walked through the house, through the courtyard and led Koss into the living room, where he sat himself on a couch, while T'Pol brought out some tea, then chose a seat across the coffee table from Koss, on an identical couch.<p>

"It is good to see you, T'Pol," said Koss, after taking a sip of tea, for the sake of manners.

"Likewise, Koss," said T'Pol, for the sake of politeness, though she'd had no desire to see the Vulcan.

"I was gratified to hear that you still lived, after the disaster which befell the Seleya," said Koss, "but disappointed that you chose to join StarFleet."

T'Pol said nothing to that, for she was not concerned with Koss' approval or his disappointment.

"But now that you are back on Vulcan," said Koss, "we should discuss where we stand."

"There is no us, Koss," said T'Pol. "Our engagement ended when I chose to accept the position of Deputy Science Officer of the Seleya. I am certain that you recall that fact."

"I do not agree, T'Pol," said Koss. "I know that my parents were upset with your choice to serve aboard the Seleya, rather than wed and accept a planet-bound assignment, but the ultimatum was just a negotiation tactic. My father hoped the ultimatum would make you choose to make the logical choice, but he did not truly mean it."

"All this is irrelevant, Koss," said T'Pol, "as I no longer find the idea of being Bonded to you agreeable. We are too different."

"I disagree," said Koss, "and I believe that your objections to our joining is caused by another. I have been told you traveled here with a Human. Is this so?"

"It is," said T'Pol, "and it is none of your concern. He is a fellow shipmate who has never seen Vulcan."

"I am certain that is all he is," said Koss, clearly skeptical. "Tell me this, T'Pol, will this 'shipmate' be willing to put his life on the line if I choose to enforce my claim to you."

"You have no claim to me, Koss," said T'Pol, "save in your imagination. But I suspect he would indeed be willing to fight for me, and given the fact that I've seen him face death a dozen times or more since we first met, I suspect he would have no trouble killing you, despite your physical advantages. But it will never come to that. You are a Vulcan, which means you understand logic, so understand this. I will never be your mate. If you move to press your claims, I will leave Vulcan, never to return. Alternately, if you annoy me enough, I might allow the ceremony to occur, Bonding you to me, and then leave Vulcan, never to return, which will be most inconvenient for you when the Blood Fever takes you, Koss. Is your mind strong enough to survive your pon farr through meditation alone? Do you wish to find out? Find another mate, and live long and prosper, or marry me and make your life a misery, until the Blood Fever takes you, and you die without a mate to ease your symptoms."

Koss looked at T'Pol, and though his expressions were subtle, anger was visible on his face.

"You have changed for the worse through the years, T'Pol," said Koss, "but now, after your ordeal on the Seleya, I begin to think you are insane. Does your Human know that fact about you?"

"I was insane when he found me, Koss," said T'Pol, "Now, may I show you the way out?"

"This isn't over, T'Pol," said Koss. "Once we are mated I can compel you to remain on Vulcan."

"You should leave now, Koss," said T'Pol, "before we both say, or do, things which we will regret later."

* * *

><p>By the time T'Pol joined Trip and T'Les at the restaurant, the two were on their desserts. They both looked at her with guarded expressions, and that was enough to tell T'Pol that her mother had allowed her tongue to run away from her.<p>

"How did things go with Koss?" said Trip, and T'Les listened attentively.

"Koss and I had an amicable discussion," said T'Pol, "and I suspect that after he considers my words he will wisely decide to select another mate."

"And how did you manage that, T'Pol?" said T'Les.

"I made a logical appeal to Koss, and I believe he will see the light of reason."

"So it's over?" said Trip.

"It was over long ago," said T'Pol, "and I am free to seek out my own mate."

T'Les went stiff at the tone of T'Pol's voice, but T'Pol merely locked eyes with her mother for a few moments, then turned to Trip, her eyes soft and feminine, and said, "So what looks good for dessert?"

10. Chapter 10

â€"***Chapter 10â€"***

The next several days went by peacefully enough, and despite her opposition to the idea of her daughter mating with Captain Tucker, T'Les could not help but notice that the two were in love, in the Human sense of the word, as a matter of passion, as opposed to the logical Vulcan view of love being something which developed over time after a properly arranged marriage. Still, there was nothing to be done over it at the moment, as T'Les saw it, for she knew T'Pol well enough to know that the foolish girl would simply pack her bags and disappear with Captain Tucker if pressed too hard.

It was clear that the two were having physical contact as well, to some degree or other, but thankfully, they were discreet enough, both at the house, and in public, although T'Pol's infatuation with the man was plain to see even so, whereas Captain Tucker was more controlled, or perhaps it was just that his body language differed enough from the Vulcan norm to make it seem so.

More so, T'Les had not heard from Koss, and was unsure of what had taken place between he and T'Pol that night, but she'd known Koss since he was a child, and he was not one to let things go, but the logical thing to do was wait for further developments, rather than speculate, but then the course of events took an unexpected turn on Vulcan.

A bomb was detonated at the United Earth Embassy to Vulcan, killing forty-three Humans, Admiral Forrest of StarFleet among them, and Administrator V'Las, head of the Vulcan High Command, made it clear whom he held responsible for the bombing: the Syrranites, a fanatical

group of ideologues who stood in opposition to the High Command, and more precisely, V'Las blamed T'Pau, one of the leading Syrranites, for physical evidence had been found at the site of the explosion which linked T'Pau to the bomb, and word over the Vulcan newsnets was that the High Command would not stand for this act of terrorism. Trip and T'Pol discussed the matter for a time, but T'Les seemed obsessed with it, and when T'Pol switched the newsvideo feed while T'Les was out of the room, T'Les returned and actually screamed at T'Pol, something which she had never before done in her life.

It was two nights later that things went to hell for Trip, which was about par for the course where Trip and desert planets were concerned. He, T'Pol and T'Les had spent the evening at home, where Trip showed T'Pol the proper construction method for a lentil, mushroom and rice pilaf and a fattoush salad, while T'Les spent the evening glued to one of the living room couches, still fixated by the newsvideos of the bombing and the Syrranite connection, but eventually, they all turned into their respective beds, as T'Pol had thought that sleeping with Trip might be too much for T'Les to handle on their first visit.

Trip, unable to sleep easily this evening had gone for a glass of iced tea, and taken that tea to the backyard rock garden, where T'Les had set out a few lounges, as she had a good view of the night sky, so much brighter than Earth's, and the distant Fire-Plains, and the view was quite exquisite. To Trip's astonishment, and his displeasure, he noticed movement and saw that three masked men had made a discreet entry into T'Les' house. They moved for the bedrooms, and they'd missed him, as he was concealed by darkness and had remained motionless until they passed his line of sight.

He sprang into motion now, grabbing a poker from the unlit fire-pit, and moved for the patio door, wishing he had a phaser pistol instead. He gently slid the patio door aside, and moved towards the back of the house, yet long before he reached the bedrooms, he heard the electric whine of a phaser rifle, and he fervently prayed that it was set on stun, for it was coming out of T'Pol's bedroom. Furious, yet disciplined, he entered T'Pol's bedroom and came upon one of those men, on the way out, and slammed the poker against the man's head, dropping him like a sack of flour. Trip then bent down to take the man's phaser rifle, when he heard a sound behind him, and turned to see two Vulcans, holding an unconscious T'Les, rifles aimed at him. It was a most unpleasant feeling, much worse than the feeling of two energy discharges shot into his body.

* * *

><p>"Trip! Trip!"<p>

Slowly, Trip's awareness expanded, and he slowly became conscious of T'Pol's face hovering over him, and with a groan, he rose to a sitting position.

"What the hell?"

"I found you unconscious in my bedroom, when I woke," said T'Pol.

"Yeah, I got the one in your bedroom," said Trip, "then two others shot me, phasers thankfully set on stun."

"Me too," said T'Pol. "They took my mother, Trip. Why would they do that?"

"I don't know," said Trip. "We need to contact"

"What?" said T'Pol, seeing that look on Trip's face, and recognizing it.

"Get your comm unit," said Trip.

T'Pol spun to follow Captain Tucker's orders: it was why they made such a good team. They trusted each other's intelligence, and she had come to trust his hunches as well. Seconds later, she handed the unit to Trip, brow raised with unasked questions. Trip activated the comm unit.

"Captain Tucker to the Columbia," said Trip.

"Ensign Burr, sir. What can I do for you?"

"Get me Captain Hernandez," said Trip. "It's an emergency."

"Yes, sir. Please hold."

T'Pol started to speak, but Trip said, "Get dressed, and get my clothes."

T'Pol moved while Trip stood. He put the comm unit in speaker mode, set it down, and began dressing when T'Pol returned with clothes for them both, until Captain Hernandez answered his hail.

"Erika here, Trip. You have an emergency?"

"Yes, Captain," said Trip. "I need you to see if you can locate my comm unit on the planet below."

T'Pol looked inquisitively at Trip, and Captain Hernandez said, "Yes, I have it."

"Scan and report please, Captain."

"I have four life signs. Vulcan. Moving south," said Erika. "The relatively slow speed of movement indicates a terrestrial vehicle, as opposed to a shuttle."

"Good," said Trip. "Do you have MACOs or ship's security forces at the ready?"

"Both," said Erika.

"I need you to assemble a team for deployment," said Trip, then remembering the professionalism of the MACOs which he'd commanded on the Seleya, he said, "make them MACOs please."

"Hold," said Erika. Her connection was suspended for some thirty seconds, then her voice returned to say, "They'll be ready to go in ten minutes. What now."

"Please continue to track that vehicle."

"Will do," said Erika. "Now, what's all this about?"

"Commander T'Pol's mother was just kidnapped by three men," said Trip. "We need to track them to their location, then beam the MACO team, along with Commander T'Pol and myself to that location, to free her mother."

"Understood," said Erika: that she would aid T'Pol's mother was never in question, given T'Pol's service in the Expanse. "I'll contact you when we're ready."

"Right," said Trip, turned off the comm unit, and handed it back to T'Pol.

She was already dressed, and now looked curiously at Trip as he hurried into his clothes, then said, "Why does my mother have your comm unit on her person?"

"We're lovers," said Trip.

"Trip," said T'Pol. "Now is not the time."

"Right," said Trip. "Look, your mom's been lounging around in her pajamas all evening long, and she's been absentmindedly fiddling with my comm unit all night long, and I didn't have the heart to say anything to her about it, because she's so upset over this Syrranite bombing. Her pajamas have pockets, and I didn't find my comm unit after she went to bed, so I figured there was a chance it was still on her."

T'Pol nodded, and they waited restlessly for some forty minutes before Captain Hernandez hailed them.

"Your four Vulcan life signs have come to a standstill in what seems to be an industrial park," said Erika. "Lightly populated at the moment. No other life signs in the particular building they're in. What now?"

"How big of a building, Captain?" said Trip.

"Big," said Erica. "Looks like a huge warehouse on the first two levels, offices on the third level. Sensors do not reveal any security systems, but it's possible that they draw too little power for us to detect them. What now?"

"Please show your MACOs squad leader your sensor scans," said Trip, "then beam them onsite, and then do the same for T'Pol and I."

"Understood," said Erika, and ten minutes later, Trip and T'Pol dematerialized, and then materialized inside a darkened building, a lone MACO standing some ten feet away from them."

* * *

><p>"Sergeant Hicks, sir," said the squad leader to Trip and T'Pol, after he'd closed the distance between them.<p>

"Glad to have your help, Sergeant," said Trip. "You've been informed

of the situation?"

"Yes, sir," said Hicks, then the man looked at T'Pol. "We'll get her out safely, Commander."

T'Pol just nodded in return, too nervous to speak.

"Now, we don't know what we're dealing with, Sergeant," said Trip, "so we don't kill anyone unless absolutely necessary to rescue T'Les, and we don't reveal our species unless necessary. The Vulcans would have a cow that we're acting alone in this matter, so let's build in some plausible deniability, just in case we need it."

"No problem, sir," said Hicks. "My team is already deployed, and waiting for my mark. Please remain here, until I call for you."

T'Pol started to speak, but Trip caught her eye, and said, "Will do, Sergeant. Don't let us keep you."

Hicks nodded, and moved off to join his team. Ten minutes later, still nothing, and T'Pol was getting restless, but five minutes later the sudden blast of sound and flash of light announced the use of flash-bangs, followed a split second behind by the electric whine of phasers. Ten more seconds, and the sound of a man's whistle reached Trip and T'Pol. They ran for the source of the sound, to see one of the MACOs working on bypassing the electronic lock on the handcuffs which restrained T'Les. In a bit he had it, and T'Les approached them, but instead of the expected subtle signs of fear, or gratitude, Trip saw determination.

"We need to speak privately, the three of us," said T'Les.

"All right," said Trip, and pointed to a spot some twenty feet away, "let's go over there."

"One moment, Captain Tucker," said T'Les, and walked back in order to thank the MACOs for her rescue.

The MACOs were busy securing the prisoners, but all of them looked up to T'Les and acknowledged her thanks.

"Anything for T'Pol's mom," said Hicks, dropping a sack over the head of a prisoner: it would keep them from seeing their captors once they overcame the effects of the phaser's stun bolts and awoke.

T'Les walked back to them, and caught the tail end of a conversation between Captain Tucker and her daughter.

"...we should notify the authorities of these people."

"No!" said T'Les. "They are agents of the authorities."

"What do you mean by that, mother?"

"They are agents of the High Command," said T'Les. "I mean they're probably a secret force of one sort or another, or they would simply have sent constables to arrest me in broad daylight, but they are working for the High Command, one way or another."

"How can you be sure?" said Trip.

"I heard them speaking while they thought I was passed out," said T'Les. "These men are no amateurs. They have a command and control structure. They're armed, skilled and efficient."

"Let us approach this from another angle, mother," said T'Pol. "Why are you wanted by the authorities?"

"Ok," said Trip. "I see we need to talk about this, and we can't do it here. Sooner or later these guys are gonna come to, or someone will come looking for them when they miss a scheduled check in, and I'd rather be gone by then. We need to get out of here."

"Your words are the essence of logic, Trip," said T'Les. "I could actually warm up to you, if it weren't for the fact that I'm certain that Koss means to chop you into mince meat as soon as he can get his hands on you."

"That's good to hear," said Trip,

"Wait," said T'Pol. "I want an answer. Why would the authorities want you, mother?"

"Because I am a Syrranite," said T'Les calmly.

"Excuse me?!" said T'Pol, flabbergasted. "I can not believe I am just finding this out, mother. What could you possibly gai€"

"See what I meant about T'Pol being difficult, Captain Tucker," said T'Les, ignoring T'Pol's questions. "It is not too late to cut your losses."

Trip looked at T'Pol, and noted that the girl was alllll worked up, and a bit bug eyed now with incredulity, at both, her mother's admission, and her advice to Captain Tucker, and Trip said, "You have a point, T'Les."

11. Chapter 11

â€"***Chapter 11â€"***

"What do you mean you're a Syrranite?" said T'Pol once again.

They'd reconvened aboard the Columbia, Trip, T'Pol and T'Les, and they were joined now by Captain Hernandez.

"I mean exactly that, T'Pol," said T'Les.

"Why did you Syrranites bomb the embassy?" said Trip.

"We did no such thing," said T'Les. "That is Administrator V'Las's doing. He is moving pieces around a chess board, furthering his own objectives, while removing those opposed to his aims at the same time."

"So what are his objective, T'Les?" said Erika.

"His long term objectives I can only guess," said T'Les, "but given

his public statements, and looking at the evidence he has presented, I believe it would be logical to deduce that he wants to start a war between Vulcan and Andoria on one front, while making the Syrranites the scapegoats for his public policy failures on the domestic front. By using the Syrranite 'threat' as an excuse, V'Las has brought new and stringent security measures into effect, measures which would have been considered unthinkable just days ago."

"And how do Syrranites stand in opposition to his objectives?" said T'Pol.

"By preaching that he follows, that we as a people follow, a corrupted form of Surak's teachings," said T'Les. "Look around you, daughter. We have a vast interstellar navy, and we use it quite freely against the Andorians, and against others occasionally. Is that truly Surak's way of peace?"

"Life's various events can make it difficult to maintain ideological purity, mother," said T'Pol.

"And do life's various events also require one to lie, and manufacture evidence?" said T'Les.

"What do you mean?" said T'Pol.

"I happen to know for a fact that T'Pau had been in the Forge for the past year or so," said T'Les, "yet the newsreels state that her DNA was found on the scene of the bombing. V'Las is trying to frame T'Pau, and the Syrranites, but this is only the start of it. Soon, Vulcan will be swimming in blood once more."

"You are exaggerating, mother," said T'Pol. "We have conducted operations against Andorians in the recent past, and Vulcan was not affected in the least."

"A Vulcan, Andorian, war might not be the sum of his goals, but rather only the beginning," said T'Les.

"So what now?" said Erika. "If T'Les is right, and the High Command is somehow mixed up in all this, she should apply for political asylum with our ambassâ€œ"

"I have no intention of seeking asylum," said T'Les.

"Then what, T'Les," said Trip.

The Vulcan was about to reply, when the Columbia's comm officer broke in from the Bridge, and said, "Captain, I have request for transport from the surface."

"Who is it?" said Captain Hernandez.

"Ambassador Soval, Captain," said Comm.

"Do it," said Erika, then when Comm logged off, she said, "Soval's presence and his words will tell us something. I'll meet him at the transport pad, take him to my Ready Room, sound him out. Don't leave this room while he's here."

Once Erika had left the room, Trip turned to T'Les and said, "If

you're not interested in asylum, what are your plans, T'Les?"

"I intend to seek refuge in the Forge."

* * *

><p>When Soval joined the three conspirators in their conference room, Erika in tow, their ongoing conversation ended in surprise, as this was not the plan.<p>

"The ambassador figured out that you were here," said Erika.

"How?" said Trip.

"It is good to see you too, Captain Tucker," said Soval.

"Likewise, Ambassador," said Trip. "I apologize for my rudeness."

"Understandable under the circumstances, Captain," said Soval. "Anyway, I had heard that T'Pol was taking her leave on Vulcan, and I tried to contact her this morning in order to discuss StarFleet's progress in the bombing investigation. When I failed to reach her, even after repeated attempts, I tried to get in touch with T'Les, and when that failed, I dropped by the house. The front door was open, and a dispassionate search of the house did not yield any sign of foul play, but the subtle signs of disorder and a hasty departure made me uneasy."

"And how did you know we were here?" said Trip.

"I thought it likely that if T'Pol was in sort of trouble she might reach out to fellow StarFleet members for help," said Soval, "and as Columbia is the only Human vessel in the vicinity, I came to speak with Captain Hernandez and see if she had heard from you. She has many good attributes, I am certain, but Captain Hernandez is not very good at dissimulation. It was clear that the captain had knowledge of your whereabouts and I was able to persuade her of my good intentions. So tell me, what is going on with you all?"

Twenty minutes later, Soval was up to speed, and looked at Trip, and said, "And how did you come to be mixed up in all this, Captain Tucker? Why are you on Vulcan?"

Trip coughed and avoided Soval's eyes, while thinking desperately for an answer. T'Pol averted her eyes from Soval, suddenly finding something of interest in a corner of the room, and it was clear from the color visible in the tips of her ears that she was flushed. T'Les smiled, if a smile might be indicated by a slight upturn at the corners of her mouth. Erika looked at Trip, T'Pol and T'Les and smiled as well: that explained what Trip was doing on Vulcan, and it explained what Trip was doing at T'Les's house: she'd wondered over those facts, ever since taking Trip's call.

Soval took it all in, and said, "Oh, I see. You have made some interesting choices lately, T'Pol."

"You know, Ambassador," said Trip, put off with Soval now, "you should get yourself a turban, a crystal ball and a deck of Tarot cards. You could get rich as a prognosticator."

"Oh, I am no fortune teller, Captain Tucker," said Soval, radiating a slight smugness, "but a diplomat becomes proficient in picking up on the things that are not stated."

"Good for you," said Trip to Soval, then turned to T'Les. "Now that we're all up to speed, back to you. What is the Forge, T'Les, and why do you want to go there?"

"Vulcan's Forge is a vast desert canyon some three thousand mile long, and eighteen hundred miles wide," said T'Les, "and the conditions within the Forge are some of the harshest on Vulcan. Surak has associations with the Forge, and given its vast size, harsh environment, and the geomagnetic instabilities that exist there and which interfere with all forms of sensor and communications technology, the Forge is a refuge for us Syrranites, from the High Command."

"So you want us to beam you into the Forge?" said Captain Hernandez, looking at T'Les.

"Transporters will not work within the Forge," said Soval. "More so, you have also left a trail from the scene of T'Les's rescue, which will be easy to verify."

"How?" said Trip.

"Soval is right," said T'Pol. "Vulcan has a net of surveillance satellites which monitor transporter beam-ins, and beam-outs, among other things. This was not a problem when we thought that my mother was kidnapped by criminals, but if the High Command is truly involvedâ€|"

Soval nodded, and T'Pol continued speaking.

"We left a trail of Human lifesign beam-ins to the site of my mother's rescue when the MACOs beamed in. Then two more lifesign beam-ins, mine and Captain Tucker's. Then two Vulcan lifesigns beam-out to the Columbia, followed by six Human lifesigns."

"That's easy enough to explain," said Trip. "T'Les was kidnapped, but she managed to get a hold of a comm unit from one of her kidnappers. T'Les called T'Pol, who contacted the Columbia, who sent a team of MACOs to that last location, then beamed T'Pol and Captain Hernandez to that location, as Captain Hernandez was spending the night with T'Pol and her mother. They did not find T'Les so they all transported back to the Columbia, to discuss the matter."

"You're are forgetting the two lifesigns being transported to the Columbia," said T'Pol.

"No, I'm not," said Trip. "You contacted Ambassador Soval for his advice. He came that location to speak with you and Captain Hernandez. He was the second lifesign. Unless, he was somewhere public last nightâ€|"

"I was at home all of last night," said Soval, "and no one could say otherwise. That is to say, it was all as Commander Tucker just described."

"But if a Vulcan cruiser scans the Columbia it will be apparent that there are three Vulcans aboard, so they'll know we're hiding T'Les," said Erika. "We'll have to sneak her down to the planet in a shuttle before we are scanned. Assuming we have not been scanned yet."

"There is no need for that," said T'Pol. "The surveillance nets which Soval speaks of exist, but no surveillance net is perfect. There are holes in the net, and for a brief time, one may beam on or off planet without notice. The satellites have fixed trajectories, and their limitations are well known to me. Give me a precise location for the satellites with a sensor telemetry reading and I can calculate the location and duration of the next hole in the net."

T'Les looked at her daughter with new eyes. She'd never seen T'Pol at work in her element, and T'Les was proud of her daughter's competence.

"Let's go to the Bridge, T'Pol," said Erika, "and get you that data."

12. Chapter 12

â€œ**Chapter 12â€œ**

"Ok, ok," said Trip, "so tell me again, why am I humping through this cursed Forge, T'Pol?"

"We are not in the Forge yet, Captain Tucker," said T'Pol.

Trip, T'Les and T'Pol had been walking for the past two hours through the dark, and had covered six miles in that time. They still had another four miles to cover before they could truly claim to be in the Forge, but that could not be helped. Ten miles away was the closest distance that the Enterprise's transporters could place the three of them, safely, and so they walked.

"As to why you are here, that answer should be obvious, Captain Tucker," said T'Pol. "We are on leave, and we are enriching ourselves culturally, by following Surak's path through the Forge. Many Vulcan pilgrims make the same journey each year, so rest assured that your sacrifice will surely win you acclaim for your fortitude."

"That acclaim won't do him much good, given the way he's wheezing," said T'Les, with amusement in her eyes. "I think he is about to drop dead."

"Charming, mother," said T'Pol. "Here I am trying to sell Captain Tucker on a magical journey through the Forge, and you are taunting him with visions of his death."

"No one asked you two to come with me," said T'Les.

"Yes," said T'Pol, "I should allow my mother to walk through the Forge, unaccompanied, to feed the first predator whose path she crosses. I find your logic flawed, mother."

"Ok," said Trip, "that explains why you're here, T'Pol. For your mom. But it doesn't explain why I'm here."

"That should be apparent, Captain Tucker," said T'Pol. "You saved my life on the Seleya. You owe me."

"Wait, what?! I owe you?" said Trip. "No, you have that backwards, T'Pol. You owe me a life, which means you shouldn't be dragging me through the Forge to my death."

"No, no, no," said T'Pol. "By Vulcan mores, you saved my life, so you are responsible for me. If you were not willing to undertake that responsibility, you should have left me on the Seleya to die."

"You're putting me on, right?" said Trip, then looked at T'Les. "She's kidding, no?"

"I told you to run when you had your chance, Captain Tucker," said T'Les. "The net closes on you, ever closer."

Trip had a pithy response for T'Les, but an odd undulating sound that seemed a mix between a cold blooded scream and a chortle startled the man.

"What the hell is that?" said Trip.

"A large v'rassa," said T'Pol. "A desert reptile, some eight feet long when fully grown. It is a carrion eater with a nasty bite, and given its diet, any bite inevitably turns gangrenous, and poisons the victim. The v'rassa tracks the dying victim, and feasts on its corpse, and then repeats the cycle until it is in turn, eaten."

"Charming desert you have here," said Trip. "I wish I had a phaser, but wait, energy weapons don't work in the Forge."

"That is why we carry spears," said T'Pol. "In any case, have no fear. The v'rassa is a cold blooded predator, which means it represents no danger to us in this chilly night air. It is so sluggish we could walk within five feet of it and it wouldn't be able to strike effectively."

"There are other predators in the Forge, T'Pol," said T'Les. "Quiet now, both of you. No need to draw them to us."

"Amen," said Trip, and the three fell silent as they continued walking towards the Forge.

* * *

><p>"Do you even know where you are going, T'Les?" said Trip, stuffing a handful of smoked almonds into his mouth.<p>

They'd been walking through the Forge for two days and nights now, mostly in the night, early morning and evening hours, invariably finding a cave, or at least some shade under an overhanging rock during the ten hours of maximum heat. Even though T'Les and T'Pol had been shaped by this planet, those hours were brutal, and for Trip they would have meant death. On the other hand, he did quite well during the night's chill, whereas the two Vulcans were quite uncomfortable in the the forty degree temperatures of the night.

"I am not a fool, Trip," said T'Les, digging into a bag of dried apricots from Earth. "We will reach the T'Karath Sanctuary soon."

"How soon?" said Trip.

"Soon," said T'Les.

"We're lost, aren't we?" said Trip.

"Yes, but don't worry," said T'Les. "Syrranites cross this area regularly, in small groups or alone, and we have organized patrols as well. We will be found, Trip."

"Great," said Trip.

"What is this fruit?" said T'Les. "It is quite tasty."

They were feeding off some rations given them by the Columbia, so all of the foods were of the Earth variety.

"This is dried mango," said T'Pol, snatching a piece for herself, "and the one you nibbled on just now, was an apricot."

"Quite tasty," said T'Les, and she would have said more, but she noticed movement, and said, "Look."

A lone Vulcan approached them, middle-aged, seemingly fit, well covered in the desert's dust, but then, they all were.

He apparently recognized T'Les, and she him, because she looked at the Vulcan and said, "I would like to introduce my daughter T'Pol and her companion, Charles Tucker. This isâ€"

"My name is Arev," said the Vulcan, interrupting T'Les.

"Yes..." said T'Les. "This is Arev."

Trip looked at T'Pol: they'd both noticed T'Les's hesitation, and knew at the very least that the man's name was not Arev.

"You were not expected any time soon, T'Les," said Arev.

"There was trouble," said T'Les. "I had no choice but to seek refuge here."

"You are always welcome here, T'Les. Always," said Arev. "But why are they here?"

"They would not allow me to come on my own, fearing for my safety," said T'Les. "Is that a problem. I vouch for my daughter, and Captain Tucker is a man of honor by all accounts."

"Captain?"

"StarFleet," said Trip.

"Ah, StarFleet," said Arev. "The High Command's lackey from another world. Are you here then on behalf of StarFleet, or the High

Command?"

"Listen," said Trip, "I understand Syrranites have a hard-on for the High Command, Arev, and I'm sure your reasons are logical, but I don't give a damn. I'm only here to see T'Les safe, and if T'Pol is ready to turn back now, I'll be glad to leave this lush tropical landscape to the desert rats, the roaches, and you."

Arev gave a snort, and said, "Well, you are no politician, that is for certain, and an honest man can not be all bad, but as it happens you can not leave. A sandstorm forms that way now, and if you try to walk through it, the wind and sand will scour the flesh from your bones quite efficiently."

Trip looked and there was indeed something that looked like a pillar of smoke forming in the distance, and it didn't look that threatening, but every Vulcan looked concerned, which meant it was no joke.

"Can we make T'Karath Sanctuary before the storm, Arev?"

"Impossible," said Arev. "One of our posts is fairly close by. There, we will find food, water and shelter."

"Can't we just find a cave around here, and wait for the storm to pass?" said Trip, looking at T'Pol.

"The storms can last days, even weeks, though that is rare," said Arev. "Come with me, or you will die of thirst in whatever hole you manage to find. When the storm passes, you and T'Pol can find your way back."

T'Pol nodded to Trip, and they followed Arev and T'Les, though walking some fifty feet behind them, for it was the first chance they'd had to speak privately since leaving the Columbia, and in due time, they reached the Syrrranite outpost of which Arev had spoken.

* * *

><p>"So what is going on with your daughter and the Human?" said Arev to T'Les, who was busy chopping up an assortment of vegetables.<p>

Arev drizzled some plosek oil down the sides of a large cast iron pan that looked remarkably like a wok. The metal was quite hot, and the oil started shimmering almost instantly, though being plosek oil, it did not smoke.

"I do not want to talk about it," said T'Les. "T'Pol has always been headstrong to a fault, and now I fear she has allowed herself to care for this Human."

Arev tossed some crushed aromatic bulbs somewhat similar in taste to garlic, along with some crushed falangar, a rhizome noted for it's spicy taste, and as the two aromatics crisped they also flavored the plosek oil.

"Oh, come now, T'Les," said Arev, curious despite himself, for

meeting Captain Tucker was his first encounter with a Human. "How did they meet?"

T'Les related the story of the Seleya, as Arev quickly stir-fried vegetables, and three kinds of fungi that looked nothing like Earth's mushrooms.

"Fascinating," said Arev, looking some fifteen feet his left, in order to glance briefly at Trip.

He scooped out the vegetables and partitioned them out onto four plates, then drizzled some more oil into the pan, tossed in and quickly stir-fried two pounds of cooked noodles, heating and crisping up the noodles while also giving them an invisibly thin coating of oil, then drizzling a sweet and spicy chili sauce over the noodles at last, and giving them one last mix and toss, to coat evenly, then partitioned them out onto the plates.

"T'Pol," said T'Les, and moments later her daughter appeared.

"Yes, mother."

"The food is ready. Get Trip."

"Apologies," said T'Pol, taking two bottles of tea, "but we will eat at the mouth of the cave. Trip has never seen a sandstorm in the Forge, and he is fascinated by it."

"Fine," said Arev, "but seal the hole when the time comes."

"Yes, Arev," said T'Pol, juggling drinks and plates, and then moving off slowly.

"She is a lovely girl, T'Les," said Arev.

"Most of the time," said T'Les diplomatically.

"Captain Tucker is an interesting man," said Arev, "and I believe T'Pol finds him so as well."

"I believe so too," said T'Les, "though I am not certain if it is just a brief infatuation for T'Pol, or something more. The man is pleasant enough, but I hope for brief infatuation. It is not a logical match."

"Life is more than logic, T'Les," said Arev, holding up the IDIC pendant which hung around his neck.

The IDIC symbol, was a pyramid with a gemstone at the cap, on a background of a circle, and stood for Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations, and had long been associated with Surak's enlightenment.

"I would not have expected to hear you say that, Arev," said T'Les, her voice ironic as she pronounced the Vulcan's name. "You do not speak kindly of Humans."

"Just because I object to the fact that the United Earth Government is acting as the High Command's dog," said Arev, "does not mean that I scorn each and every Human."

"Well," said T'Les, "I imagine the matter is out of my hands. Either the foolish girl will run off with the man back to StarFleet, or her chosen mate, Koss will exercise his claim to T'Pol, and kill Captain Tucker if the man should object to that fact."

"Those may be the main probabilities, as you see them, T'Les," said Arev, "but they are not the only possible outcomes."

* * *

><p>"Here, Trip," said T'Pol, handing over his plate of food, while juggling two drinks, and her own food.<p>

"Thanks," said Trip, looking up at T'Pol, and taking a plate, and reaching for a drink. "Let me take that bottle from you."

"Thank you," said T'Pol, and sat next to Trip.

They both stared out the open hole they'd left in the wall of stones they'd built as a barrier to the storm's fury. Out there, in the barren waste of the Forge, a monster storm was brewing. What had originally seemed a simple pillar of smoke to Trip, now covered 180 degrees of the horizon, a gigantic wall of sand turning over and over itself, like a huge tornado, the entire edifice being lit regularly by gigantic bolts of lightning which split, and split again, to create a seeming web of energy, and if the sight of the storm inspired awe, the sound of thunder was frightening.

"That's amazing, T'Pol," said Trip. "I've never seen anything like this before. How long until the storm gets here?"

"Not long," said T'Pol. "You feel the wind picking up?"

"Oh, yes," said Trip.

"It could be much worse, but this opening is properly oriented to minimize the wind's effect," said T'Pol. "If we left the cave, and moved twenty feet from the cave's walls, the winds would propel us through the air like tumbleweeds, unless we laid flat on the earth."

"Fascinating," said Trip, teasing T'Pol, but she merely nodded, and tucked into her food, and Trip followed her lead.

"Arev is quite the cook," said T'Pol, appreciating the flavor the Vulcan had extracted from relatively few ingredients, mostly by caramelizing the vegetables and noodles with extreme heat, and masterful seasoning.

"He is, but Arev is not his name."

"Obviously," said T'Pol.

"So why would your mom lie to us?" said Trip.

"I do not know," said T'Pol. "I bet now that you wish we had gone to Tahiti, as I had suggested."

"You're right about that," said Trip. "You pick our next three

vacations."

"Excellent," said T'Pol, pleased, for if Trip was planning three years in advance, that was a good sign that he thought well of their relationship.

They finished their meals in silence, Trip drawing inspiration from the sight of the storm, T'Pol drawing comfort from the presence of the man. It was odd. They'd known each other for a relatively short time, yet even now, she could not imagine going back to her old life, without her mate—that is to say, without this man in her life.

"Here," said Trip, standing. "Give me your plate, T'Pol."

"Thank you."

"I'm grabbing myself another tea," said Trip. "May I bring you back one as well?"

"No, thank you."

Trip left, and when he returned to T'Pol's side, he found the Vulcan in a pitiful position, with head hung down, her bangs covering her eyes. Perhaps she was tired, perhaps she was sad. Avec and T'Les were huddled together as they spoke, so as he stood next to T'Pol, he tousled her hair and rubbed the tips of her ear playfully, then sat next to her.

"T'Pol," said Trip.

"Hmmm?"

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," said T'Pol.

"T'Pol," said Trip, "you're not Human. You are supposed to be logical. Share your thoughts."

"I fear that something terrible will happen, Captain Tucker," said T'Pol. "I wish that we had never come here."

"So we leave T'Les here," said Trip, "since these are her friends, then make our way out of the Forge when the storm clears, and off Vulcan. We're off duty, so we're not bound to spend the rest of our leave here. Without the use of modern technology the odds of the High Command finding her are damned low."

"I suppose so," said T'Pol. "I just hope nothing happens to you here. I can not go back."

"Go back to what?" said Trip.

"To what I was," said T'Pol.

"What do you mean?" said Trip, but T'Pol suddenly raised her head.

She stood, and said, "We need to seal up the cave."

She started piling up rocks at the opening, and Trip followed her lead. Arev and T'Les saw them working, and joined in as well in the effort. It was amazing to Trip, how quickly the storm hit their refuge. Literally twenty seconds had passed since T'Pol had raised her head, to now, and the storm was fully upon them, and Murphy's Law was proven once again in the universe: anything that can go wrong, will go wrong, and suddenly a bolt of lightning struck the mouth of the cave, and affected both Arev, and T'Les, knocking them from their feet.

Trip was closest to T'Les so bent over her supine form, gently slapping her face, while calling her name. T'Pol bent over Arev, and the Vulcan was conscious, but badly hurt. As T'Pol bent over the Vulcan, he reached up and touched the psi-points on her face, and T'Pol would have fought the Vulcan's touch, but he'd paralyzed her somehow.

"You must carry it to sanctuary," said Arev, and moments later, released T'Pol.

"What have you done to me?" said T'Pol.

"You must carry it to sanctuary, T'Pol."

"Carry what?"

"Surak's katra!"

13. Chapter 13

â€œ**Chapter 13â€œ**

T'Les had recovered her senses after an hour or so, as Arev had taken the brunt of the electric discharge. She saw the Vulcan's body laying on the cave's sand floor, and it was apparent that he was dead.

"Oh, Syrran," said T'Les, obviously emotional. "No! No!"

The emotion openly displayed by her mother was more than enough to surprise T'Pol, but when she heard the name Syrran, she realized she'd met the leader of the Syrranites, and that leader was now dead. She glanced at Trip, and he'd clearly come to the same conclusion about Syrran. More disturbing still, to T'Pol, were Syrran's final words to her. Was it possible? Ridiculousâ€¦ But if Syrran and T'Les truly believed that to be true, well, that would explain her mother's reaction.

"We must carry Syrran's body back to T'Karath Sanctuary," said T'Les, "and notify T'Pau of this disaster. Syrran warrants an honorable burial."

"That is a ten hour journey," said T'Pol. "It is logical that we bury Syrran here, and mark his grave. His memory will not be tarnished, for lack of pomp and circumstance."

"You do not understandâ€¦" said T'Les, then looked oddly at T'Pol. "How do you know the distance to T'Karath Sanctuary? Did Syrran tell you our distance from T'Karath Sanctuary?"

T'Pol was confused herself over that fact, so said nothing.

"T'Pol," said T'Les, "how do you know?"

"Syrran touched the psi-points on my face shortly before he died," said T'Pol. "It is possible that he transferred some of his memories to me before"

T'Les scrambled to her feet, excited now, and said, "We must make our way for T'Karath now! There are mind-priests there, and they can verify if my suspicions are correct."

"And what are your suspicions?" said Trip.

"That Syrran used the last few moments of his life to transfer Surak's katra, from his mind to T'Pol's," said T'Les, ignoring the superficial burns on her hands and face, to fasten her desert boots onto her feet now. "We will lay Syrran's body to rest outside, as T'Pol suggested, and then we move. We will come back for his body."

It took the three of them an hour or so to create a rock mound over Syrran's grave, a mound of sufficient size to deter the scavengers of Forge, and then Trip, T'Les and T'Pol headed South, headed for T'Karath Sanctuary.

* * *

><p>Administrator V'Las entered the High Command's opulent chamber, and everyone stood, including his fellow four members. Together, these five Vulcans were the High Command, and their will was generally the law. Technically, the General Assembly could overrule the High Command with a 75% majority, though such a thing had never happened during the Chairmanship of Administrator V'Las.<p>

V'Las took his seat, and looked at the two Vulcans standing before the High Command.

"Admiral Volek, General Topar," said V'Las, "Vulcan needs you now, for we are in dire straits. No doubt you have all heard of the resolution of the Xindi crisis for the Humans, due to the actions of the Enterprise, but what you may or may not know, is that Andoria sent one of their battlecruisers to the Expanse, ostensibly to aid the Enterprise, but actually, to learn the workings of the Xindi planet killing weapon. We believe they are constructing such a weapon now, and I do not need to tell you that weapon's first target."

Volek and Topar looked at each other. They'd both faced Andorian Imperial Guards in combat, and were quite aware of the hatred which the Andorians held for the Vulcans.

"Accordingly," said V'Las, "on behalf of the High Command, I order you to prepare your troops and your ships. There will soon be an end to the Andorian problem, once and for all, on my command."

Both Volek and Topar saluted the High Command, and left the room, and as they moved through the building on their way out, they spoke briefly.

"This is foolishness, General," said Volek. "If we could have conquered Andoria, we would have done so long ago. We will lose hundreds of ships, and tens of thousands of troops in this enterprise."

"True," said Topar, "but if the Andorians are truly building a Xindi style weapon we must act."

"We are briefed by the V'Shar each morning, General," said Volek, "yet we have not seen proof of such a threat from the Andorians."

"That does not mean that such a threat does not exist," said Topar, "and if so, we can not ignore it."

"True, but I will speak of my concerns with members of the General Assembly," said Volek. "If they can verify this Andorian super-weapon, fine. We will do what we must, but if this weapon does not exist, then logic must prevail."

"Agreed," said Topar.

* * *

><p>"I have tested your daughter," said Mi'Skelle, the wisest of the Kolinahr priests at T'Karath Sanctuary. "You were right, T'Les."<p>

"Praise, Syrran," said T'Les, for though Syrran had been a visionary, and the loss of his katra was a grievous wound to the Syrranites, he had indeed saved something even more precious, Surak's katra.

"Praise Syrran, indeed," said Mi'Skelle fervently, though she'd known Syrran for five decades now and honored him greatly, most especially now, for Syrran could have saved his own katra in those last few moments of life, yet he had sacrificed himself, in order to save Surak's katra. "We must decide on a proper host for Surak's katra, or better yet, find a still functioning katric ark to host his katra."

T'Les nodded. The art of constructing a katric ark was a lost skill to modern Vulcans, though there was hope among the Syrranites that eventually the process would be rediscovered, but as things stood, a katra either accepted an ark, or not, and invariably, an ark rejected by one katra was rejected later by every other subsequent katra.

"Until we find a proper host," said Mi'Skelle, "your daughter will continue to hold Surak's katra."

"Yes," said T'Les. "As you wish."

* * *

><p>"Here," said T'Pol, handing Trip one of the two glasses in her hands. "You must stay well hydrated."<p>

"I'm not thirsty," said Trip, taking the glass anyway.

"Drink," said T'Pol, then sat next to him.

"So did you pass your test?"

"Yes," said T'Pol.

"So am I speaking to both of you now?"

"It's not a possession, Trip," said T'Pol. "I can, and have, and will again reach out to Surak's katra during my meditation, but he's not just piggybacking along with me every minute of the day."

"So now I know," said Trip, "and you should know thâ€" "

Trip's thought was interrupted by the sound of explosions above their heads, for they were presently some thirty feet below ground, in the monk's dormitories. Moments later, T'Pau and T'Les stormed the room, looking for them both.

"We must leave!" said T'Pau. "The High Command's forces are bombing the sanctuary, using old fashioned chemical explosives, and soldiers will come once the explosions end."

As soon as T'Pau had stated that they were to leave the sanctuary, Surak's katra had stirred to consciousness.

"Hurry," said T'Les, for T'Pol was just standing there, as if dumbstruck.

"T'Pol," said Trip softly, aware that something was happening with her.

T'Pol noticed none of them now, for before her stood an elder Vulcan male, a look of wisdom, and bone-deep sadness in his eyes, and she knew she was interacting with Surak's mental image, projected into her consciousness by the Vulcan's katra.

"Greetings, T'Pol," said Surak, and gave T'Pol the ta'al.

"Greetings, Surak," said T'Pol, returning the gesture of greeting with the father of Vulcan logic.

"I sense your urgency, but we can not leave the sanctuary just yet," said Surak. "We can not leave without the Kir'Shara, for it will aid our people to forge a path back to the ways of logic, the ways of sobriety, the ways of enlightenment."

T'Pol recognized the name of the legendary artifact named Kir'Shara, a legacy of Surak's time, cataloging his thoughts as he arrived at the path of logic, and laying out a course for his people to follow. Most Vulcans believed the Kir'Shara existed, but none had seen it since shortly after Surak's death.

"T'Pol!" said T'Pau. "We must leave. What is wrong with you?"

"We can not leave yet, T'Pau," said T'Pol. "We must retrieve the Kir'Shara. It is not far from here."

"You are mad, T'Pol," said T'Pau. "We have searched every inch of this sanctuary for the past twenty years. I assure you, the Kir'Shara is not here."

T'Pol ignored T'Pau, and moved off through the narrow passageways, Trip, T'Les and T'Pau in tow. They descended deeper into the earth now, to the crypts and tunnels where the corpses of former Vulcan adepts and Kolinahr masters, now long since mummified by the dry desert air, were laid to rest, and all could hear T'Pol mumbling names now and then, as she recognized some of these adepts, or rather, Surak's katra recognized them, and named them through T'Pol. She finally came to the place she sought, and pushed a humble door aside, to bring them all face to face with the mummified corpse of a Vulcan, sitting in the meditative position, on a plain stone dais.

"T'Klass," said T'Pol fondly, touching the mummy's brow, "first my student, then my friend, and later still my colleague. You have watched over your charge for so long, but now I come to relieve you of your duty."

T'Pol, knelt then, and must have pressed a button hidden into the dais, for a portion of the wall slid aside, to reveal the Kir'Shara. The artifact was a small stone pyramid, some twenty inches high. It had a relatively small base, and a long body, with archaic Vulcan symbols carved into its surface.

"The Kir'Shara," said T'Pau in an awed whisper.

"If only Syrran could see this," said T'Les.

"Why did you not share the location of the Kir'Shara with Syrran," thought T'Pol, to Surak.

"It was safer here," said Surak, "where none knew of its presence. But now it is needed to bring truth to our people."

"We need to leave, now, T'Pol," said Trip, who had left them for a bit, and now returned. "Soldiers are moving through the sanctuary, probably looking for T'Pau. The Syrranites are resisting them, but they can't win against their numbers."

"There is an exit through here," said T'Pau. "Come, all of you."

Sure enough, they wandered through a series of tunnels for the next half hour, picking up a dozen Syrranites as bodyguards along the way, and twice fighting off soldiers, at the cost of nine Syrranite lives, before finally coming out to the surface two miles to the East of the T'Karath sanctuary, which burned brightly now, as Syrranites fought soldiers to the death with fanatical devotion, in order to buy T'Pau time to spirit T'Pol away, and make good their escape.

"This way," said T'Pau, who was most familiar with the current topography in this area of the Forge, and they soon disappeared from view, the rough terrain providing them with both hard cover and concealment.

* * *

><p>The majestic building which housed the offices and the Chamber of the General Assembly on the lower floors, and the Chamber of the High Command on the upper floors, they were all packed, for this was a momentous day, and the measures passed here today would require passage by both the High Command and the General Assembly. It was here that Soval came this day, followed by T'Pol, T'Pau and Trip, and the four of them made their way to the floor of the General Assembly just in time to view the face of Administrator V'Las, as he addressed the General Assembly.<p>

"and so," said V'Las, "the time has come to put an end to the Andorian menace once and for all! We will tolerate Andorian games no longer, nor will we tolerate them building a super-weapon to match the Xindi plans they've stolen in the Expanse. You will all shortly cast your votes, and you must realize that you cast your votes for Vulcan: to give it life, or sentence it to death!"

The monitor went dark then, and the three-hundred members of the General Assembly spoke with each other in animated voices, and it was through this crowd that Soval moved, followed closely by T'Pol, T'Pau, T'Les and Trip. Soval had been a diplomat his entire adult life, and an ambassador for many decades, and in that time he had done many favors so it was no trouble for him to ask for special dispensation to be allowed to address the General Assembly.

"Honored General Assembly," said Soval, "I address you for two reasons today. The lesser, yet still vital 2nd reason, is to call for a vote against the High Command's resolution to attack Andoria. I have seen no proof that Andoria is constructing a Xindi weapon to destroy Vulcan, and from what I have heard, no one has seen such proof, and so I ask that you withhold your support from this mad venture, and let cooler heads prevail, for this military enterprise will be a disaster for both our species. You know the battle prowess and fighting spirit of the Andorian Imperial Guards easily matches that of our troops, and their ships are no less formidable: if we could have conquered Andoria, we would have done so during one of the many military skirmishes we have conducted against the Andorians in years past. I do in fact, accuse Administrator V'Las of using this proposed military attack to distract attention from his domestic failures, at the very least, and I call for investigation."

The General Assembly was enveloped in a stunned silence, for Soval's words were inflammatory, and by making such accusations it was certain that he had scuttled an honorable career that had taken him a lifetime's effort to accomplish, and it was quite possible that V'Las would do much more than that to repay Soval's words.

"But even more important than that," said Soval, for he wanted to say his piece quickly, as he feared that the High Command's security officers would soon arrest him, if V'Las got wind of his actions, "I bring you news that will reorder our entire society, and do away with the High Command, for I have the honor of telling you that Surak's katra, long thought lost to us, has been found, and it resides now in T'Pol, daughter of S'evек and T'Les, and even more so, the Kir'Shara has been found!"

The General Assembly instantly erupted in an outburst of emotion, for such news was more than enough to test the emotional discipline of even the most controlled of Vulcans, and all knew that Soval was not fool enough to make such claims without proof. Among this chaos, a

dozen of the High Command's guards moved for the podium, but they were set upon and disarmed long before reaching Soval.

"I ask that before the General Assembly approves of launching a war against Andoria," said Soval, "it first consults the Kir'Shara, and Surak's katra, if necessary, in order to determine the logical path for us all to take, as a people."

S'Lenek, the High Mind-Priest officiating as spiritual adviser to the Assembly took the dais and approached T'Pol, then laid hands on the psi-points on her face. T'Pol was uneasy with the elder Vulcan's touch, but understood his purpose, and stood still as the priest communed with Surak's katra. The entire chamber had fallen silent, and the crowd's tension was palpable. Finally, S'Lenek stepped back, and faced the crowd.

"It is he," said S'Lenek, his voice filled with wonder. "It is truly he! Surak's katra has returned to his people, and we owe the Syrranites our eternal thanks!"

The crowd erupted in a roar of cheers, and the roar redoubled when T'Pol touched a portion of the Kir'Shara in a particular way, and the stone glowed with light from within, and Surak's words were projected holographically from the Kir'Shara, for his people to read, and understand, and internalize.

* * *

><p>Things had changed greatly in the twelve hours since Soval's appeal to the Grand Assembly. Now Administrator V'Las no longer held his chairmanship in the High Command, and investigators would soon go over the political maneuvers he'd performed during his time with the High Command, for his motives were now suspect. The Kir'Shara was on display, though heavily guarded, and Surak's original writings would soon be widely dispersed to all Vulcans via the news-nets. One of the few functioning katra-arcs was brought forth for Surak's use, and his katra transferred there from T'Pol's mind. Three days later, that particular Vulcan had enough of Vulcan's excitement, and petitioned Captain Tucker to revisit her idea, and spend the next three months on Earth, in Tahiti. He agreed, and soon after, things went predictably to hell.<p>

Trip had earlier boarded the Columbia to bring Captain Hernandez up to speed on all that had occurred, and personally thank her, and her MACO team for their help in T'Les's rescue, and by the time Trip returned to T'Les's house, expecting to find T'Pol all packed and ready for their departure, he found instead, T'Les and Soval, sipping tea, yet no sign of T'Pol.

"Where is she?" said Trip, looking to T'Les for answers.

"You should sit down, Captain Tucker," said Soval.

Trip sensed that the good ambassador was about to say something he wouldn't like, and said, "What? Just spit it out."

"Trip, please," said T'Les, sensitive to the man's mood, for she'd grown to like him, and understand what T'Pol found desirable in Trip.

Trip sat, then eyed them both, and said, "Tell me. I know I'm not going to like it, but tell me anyway."

"T'Pol is not here, Captain Tucker," said Soval. "A constable came and summoned her to court. Koss has chosen to exercise his legal options over T'Pol, and intends to Bond her soon. T'Pol will likely fight that maneuver, but her legal standing is shaky at best."

"She told me Koss was nothing to worry about," said Trip. "She said their engagement was broken when she chose to serve onboard the Seleya, despite his clan's disapproval."

"She may feel that way," said T'Les, "but that does not make it true, Trip."

"So one Vulcan can force another to Bond against their will?" said Trip. "That's logical."

"It has nothing to do with logic, Captain Tucker," said Soval, "but with biology."

"Elaborate," said Trip.

"A bargain was made long ago that Koss and T'Pol should be Bonded," said Soval. "Now that both are mature, the normal course of events would be to wait for Koss to enter pon'far, and they then would then be Bonded, but T'Pol's freewheeling ways have thrown a wrench in the normal course of events, and she does so still, by seeking to void the agreement between her clan, and Koss's clan. That can not be."

"If she doesn't want Koss, he should find another mate," said Trip.

"You are thinking this through as a Human, without our biological drives," said T'Les. "Most Vulcans have mates, pre-selected. If Koss enters pon'far and has to scramble to find a mate quickly, he will likely have to settle for what he can find, and such a mate would not necessarily be as well suited for him, as T'Pol."

"A mate that does not wish to be Bonded to him, is not well suited for him," said Trip.

"Trip," said T'Les, "you must understand"

Seeing that this discussion was pointless, Trip said, "I want to speak with T'Pol."

"That is not possible," said Soval. "Once she has made her appeal, she will be in seclusion until a decision is rendered."

"I will make us some tea," said T'Les, "and then we will discuss things, Trip. You must see reason."

Once T'Les had walked away, Trip said, "I need your help, Soval. Can I trust you?"

Soval nodded.

"I know I can't trust T'Les. She would likely play some games with

me, and justify it using logic," said Trip, "but can I trust you?"

Soval nodded once again, and Trip nodded.

"Than tell me when the courts determine the status of T'Pol's case," said Trip.

"It is not a difficult case. A decision will likely be rendered by the end of the day," said Soval, "and I will inform you of the court's decision."

"And you will inform me of the location in which the Bonding ceremony will be held," said Trip.

"If you plan what I suspect," said Soval, "I will advise you to rethink your plans, Captain Tucker. It is illogical to cast your life away, for an infatuation."

"I don't need your approval, Soval," said Trip. "I do however need that information."

Soval thought for a moment, sighed, and said, "You will have it, Captain Tucker."

End
file.